

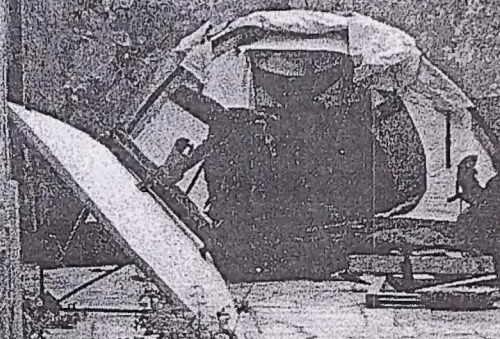
SOJOURNER

• CRITICAL REFLECTIONS
ON TRAVEL •

SAVE



ME!



By Steve L. June 2007

I've BEEN MEANING TO START THIS ZINE FOR YEARS,
 & I SUPPOSE I ALREADY HAVE, IN THE FORM OF
 LETTERS & JOURNAL ENTRIES. BUT TO PUT ALL
 THIS TOGETHER HAS BEEN MORE DIFFICULT THAN
 I EVER IMAGINED. THERE IS SO MUCH, NOT JUST
 IN THE FORM OF WRITINGS, BUT IN MY HEAD MY
 CONSCIOUSNESS, MY MEMORY & EVEN IN A DODGY
 MEMORY THAT I'LL NEVER GET ON PAPER. BUT
 HERE'S TO A BEGINNING & POSSIBLY THE FIRST
 OF A SERIES OF THESE REFLECTIONS & RAMBLING
 THE PEOPLE & PLACES MENTIONED IN THE FOLLOWING
 PAGES ARE REAL. THIS IS MY JOURNEY.



A you'd like copies of *Sojourner*,
Refuge (2005) or future zines...
 TRY ME AT:

Suzebe@riseup.net or
 52 HAMILTON PL. OAKLAND, CA
 94612

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MOLotov cocktail through the streets
of TANGIERS, MOROCCO

i am making plans again, thinking about traveling this fall. south, of course. south while my dad goes either east or west, either way ending up in iraq. i told my mom i wasn't going to follow through with my plans for moving to mexico this fall now that dad is leaving...i need to have good communication with her and my brothers. she said, "you know, suze, there is this new technology that you could really use. there are these things called cell phones and if you got one we could probably be in better communication while you are in mexico than we do now." hmmm, i'll have to think that one over. mom can be sneaky.

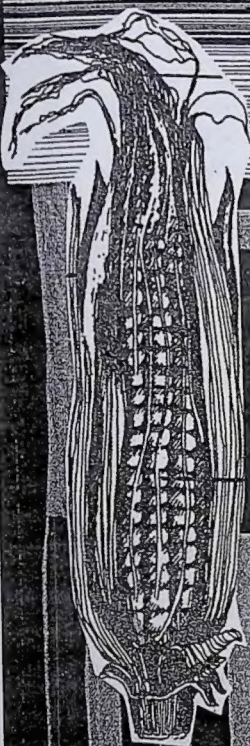


3

ROBERTO, GUAPOLINA, CHIHUAHUA MEXICO

i'm not sure where my first roadtrip was to, or even how it began, but i'm going to guess it was to a beach in new jersey, ocean City beach maybe--because i've seen the picture somewhere of me and my older sister sitting high up on the shoulders of my tanned 18 year old mom and a friend of hers, sue vella i think. we sang 'i wear my sunglasses at night' over and over and probably slept while mom went out with her friends. i was never one for the beach, except maybe later in life when i found ones isolated on crete or in mexico. but those beaches are different with their stones and winds and sharp coral reefs. i found them with lovers or would-be lovers or close friends. i found them alone sometimes, and occasionally with a ~~beagle~~ beagle named gutter & a guy that looks like shaggy from scooby-doo.

what i never found on those beaches was a reason to stay--not even sweetwater beach which offered ~~when~~ escape when i needed it most. too bad it was my own head i needed to escape. many of my travels have led me to places i could consider spending the rest of my life in...places not always beautiful, but always meaningful and important. yet i come back to this Country which i speak so seriously of leaving for good one of these days, back to a place i really can call home, and have to even when i don't want to. and oakland, well, oakland got me hooked and the only reason i'm planning on mexico is so when i get back i can be an even better teacher for my students here in oakland. well, not the only reason, but a huge one. anyway, there will always be more material for there will always be a reason to leave, at least for a spell.



i tell folks who ask OR need to know, "i'm going to México for 5 months. in july." invariably, they ask "where to?" and i sigh or look uninterested & say, "most likely to the south." when they inquire as to how i will occupy my time, i say "work".

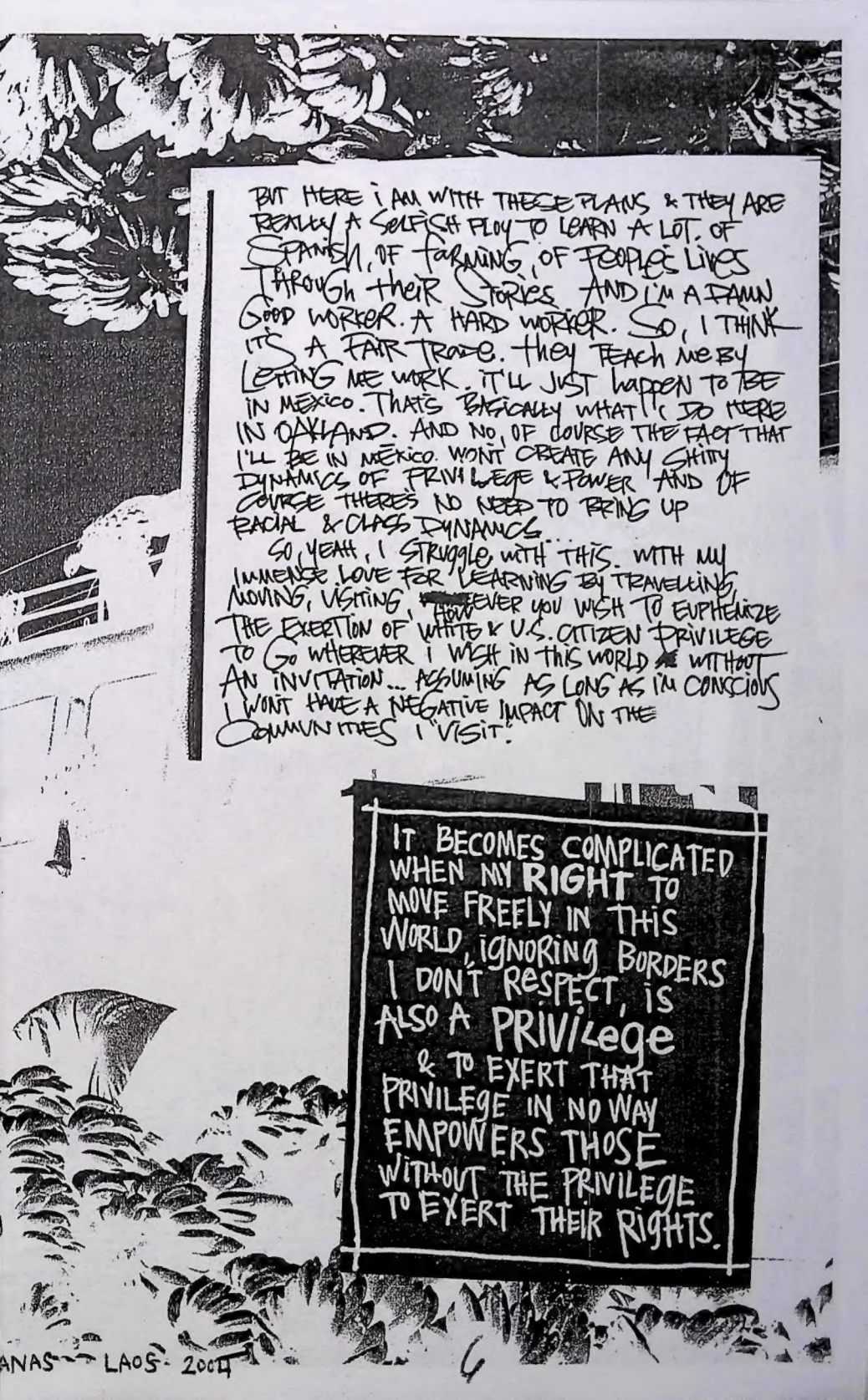
"Yeah, i'll be looking for work on a farm or working on an urban agriculture project. They'd like to do some migrant support work." i mumble. they look interested & i wonder, who the hell i am talking like that... maybe u berkeley got to me after all. i sound like an ass.

Yeah, i'm migrating to Mexico to do backbreaking farm labor for free - and then i'm going to help the migrants.

I CAN JUST SEE IT NOW... SOME FARMER TELLING HIS BROTHER...



"HEY CARLOS!
I GOT SOME
GUERRA HERE
WHO WANTS
TO WORK ON THE
FARM FOR SOME
TORTILLAS &
A PLACE TO PUT
HER TENT!
These FUCKEN
GRINGOS, I TELL
YA... I'LL NEVER
UNDERSTAND
'EM!"



BUT HERE I AM WITH THESE PLANS & THEY ARE
REALLY A SELFISH PLOY TO LEARN A LOT OF
SPANISH, OF FARMING, OF PEOPLE'S LIVES
THROUGH THEIR STORIES AND I'M A DAMN
GOOD WORKER. A HARD WORKER. SO, I THINK
IT'S A FAIR TRADE. THEY TEACH ME BY
LETTING ME WORK. IT'LL JUST HAPPEN TO BE
IN MEXICO. THAT'S BASICALLY WHAT I DO HERE
IN OAKLAND. AND NO, OF COURSE THE FACT THAT
I'LL BE IN MEXICO WON'T CREATE ANY SHITTY
DYNAMICS OF PRIVILEGE & POWER AND OF
COURSE THERE'S NO NEED TO BRING UP
RACIAL & CLASS DYNAMICS

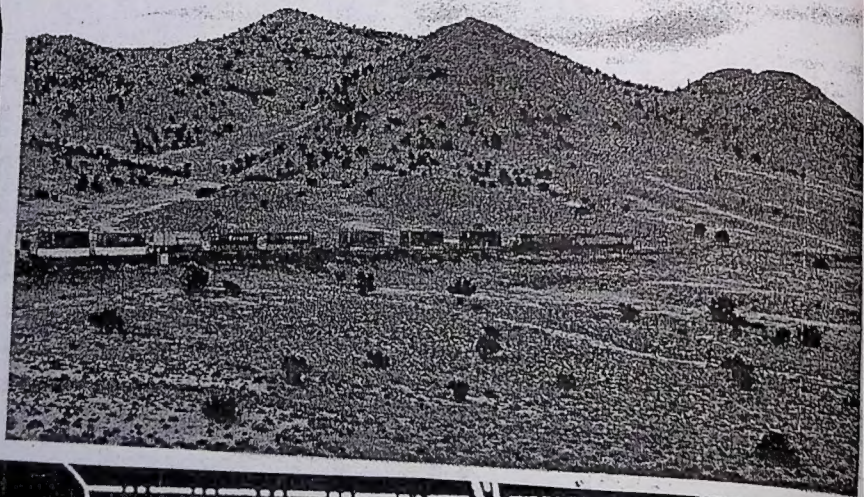
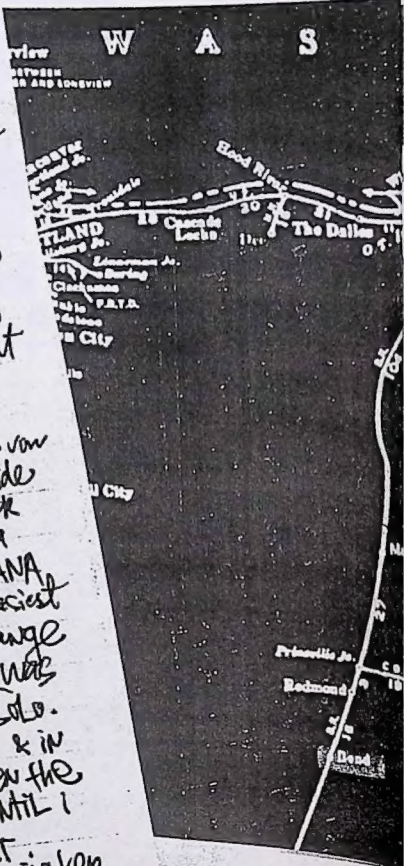
SO, YEAH, I STRUGGLE WITH THIS. WITH MY
IMMENSE LOVE FOR LEARNING BY TRAVELLING,
MOVING, VISITING, ~~HOW~~ ^{HOW} EVER YOU WISH TO EUPHEMIZE
THE EXERCISE OF WHITE & U.S. CITIZEN PRIVILEGE
TO GO WHEREVER I WISH IN THIS WORLD ~~WITH~~ WITHOUT
AN INVITATION... ASSUMING AS LONG AS I'M CONSCIOUS
I WON'T HAVE A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON THE
COMMUNITIES I VISIT.

IT BECOMES COMPLICATED
WHEN MY RIGHT TO
MOVE FREELY IN THIS
WORLD, IGNORING BORDERS
I DON'T RESPECT, IS
ALSO A PRIVILEGE
& TO EXERT THAT
PRIVILEGE IN NO WAY
EMPOWERS THOSE
WITHOUT THE PRIVILEGE
TO EXERT THEIR RIGHTS.

ANYWAY, I'VE GOT MY TICKET FROM TUVANA →
D.F. Rachel is coming with me for
the first month, which is a little scary,
just seeing as how that's always the case
for me - it's always a risk to
travel with someone else

but we did well together last
summer, hopping trains & hitching coast to
coast to coast, then border to border,
although I did that last part on my own
in one giant stretch of madness that
left me vowing to never return to
the state of Oregon, never to try meth
(although in Drexler Ave, I didn't have to run
that to myself) and to never accept a ride
from a guy named Glen again, no matter
how far we'd take me. I hopped a
grainner out of white fish, MONTANA,
which incidentally is perhaps the easiest
& least intimidating ~~the~~ crew change
to catch out of in the U.S. it was
my first time riding freights solo.

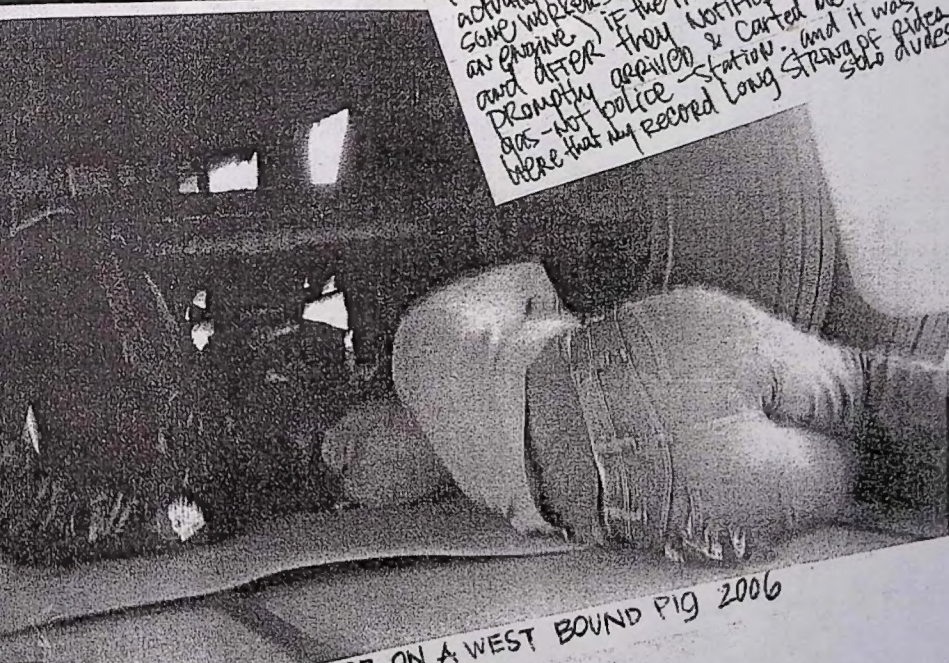
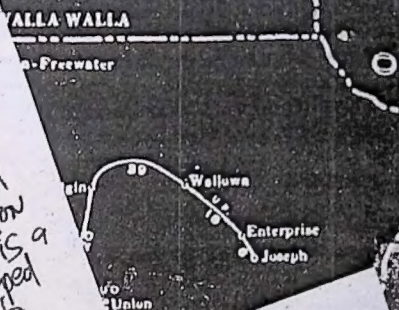
I got to the tracks around 1pm & in
broad daylight strolled between the
rows of rail & blackberries until I
found a good place to wait
within an ~~hour~~ hour, a junker



CALIFORNIA

killed up & slowed. Not seeing any
 containers or grainers with
 torches i hopped on a pig while
 the train was moving slow enough that
 my heart was beating faster than
 the train wheels turning over
 each to. i was getting comfortable
 when the train jerked to a stop
 i couldn't decide if i wanted to ride a
 pig on the way into southern washington
 where i know there is a
 high security vault. i jumped
 off. i hustled down the tracks to
 see if there were any 40's, hopped on
 another pig, hopped off & eventually decided
 to wait for another train. all this nonsense

& there was no one around to hassle me.
 i found a grainier on the next one that
 came through 4 hrs later. i rode to
 Colingen washington & got off after
 sitting in the jasco yard for 2 hrs.
 Hoping the train would pick me up to a start
 actually i only got off after i asked
 some workers (by shouting as they passed on
 an engine) if the train was dead. i asked
 and after they notified the dead bull who
 promptly appeared & carted me off to be
 processed - not police station. and it was
 here that my record long strap of plates with
 solo dices...



Interview
 CATCHING SOME SLEEP ON A WEST BOUND PIG 2006

NEVADA

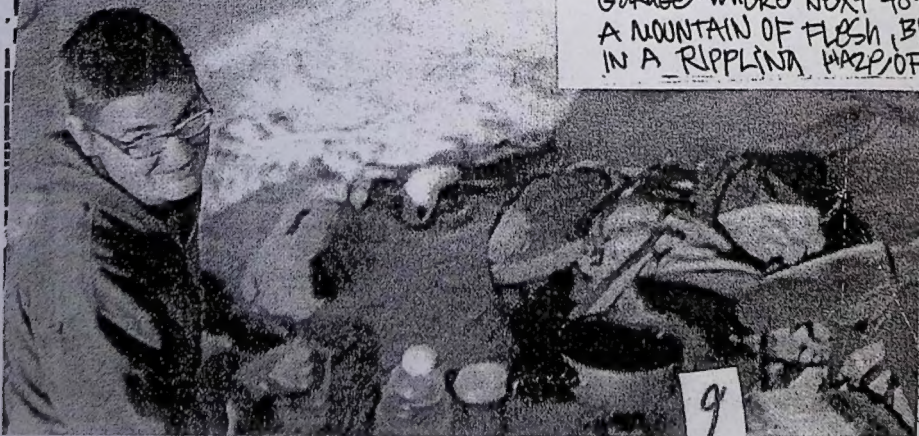
INCLUDING, BUT CERTAINLY NOT LIMITED TO:

① A 75 yr old SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST WHO TRIED TO CONVINCE ME OF SOME CATHOLIC CONSPIRACY BEFORE ATTEMPTING TO CONVERT ME. HE THOUGHT I WAS A BOY UNTIL, VAGUELY IN RESPONSE TO SOME QUESTION, I TOLD HIM THAT I WAS A LESBIAN - WHICH I'M NOT BUT I DIDN'T WANT TO CONFUSE HIM BY TALKING ABOUT QUEERS. HE KICKED ME OUT.

② A chain smoking meth addict. (though he swore he wasn't tweaking at the time BUT it was clear that meth had an affect on him - even if he wasn't high. we stopped & swam in the columbia river; he told me of his pot head girlfriend who beat him up regularly, and then we stopped to see Frank.

we pulled up into a dusty lot just off the highway where an old man with belly hanging over belt came out of his trailer to meet us. he offered me an MGD while his dog sniffed my crotch, probably anxious to smell anything other than the stench of decomposed & burning flesh. you see, FRANK = CREMATED ROADKILL for a living mostly dogs. he coaxed us into a garage where next to the incinerator A MOUNTAIN OF FLESH, BLOATED & COOKED IN A RIPPLING MAZE OF FLIES, RO

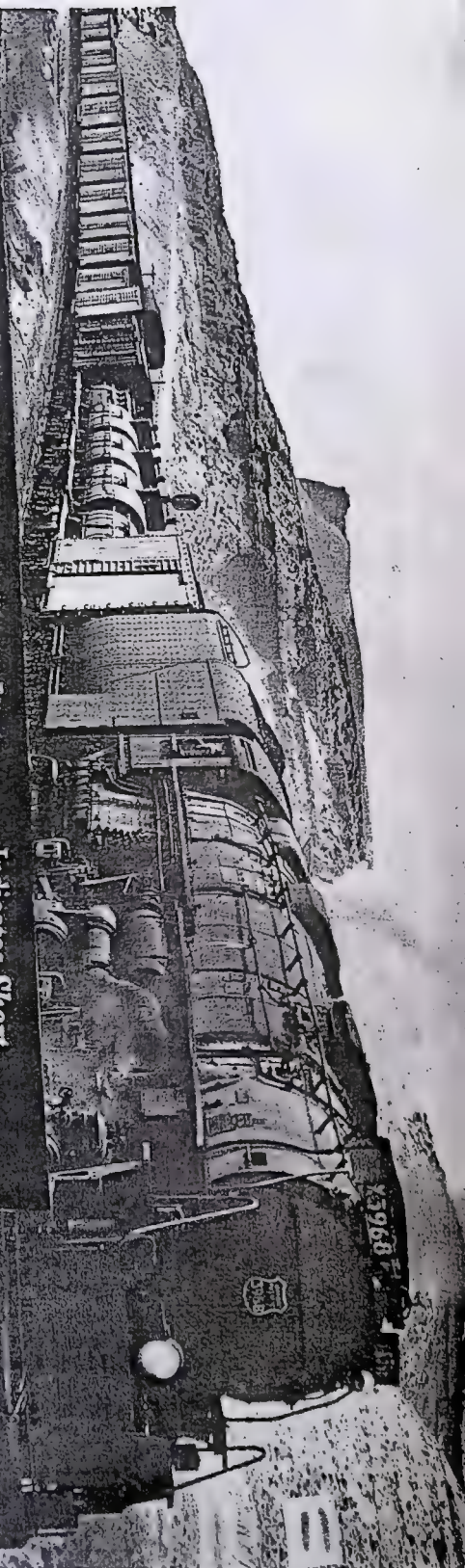
DEATH VALLEY 2006



all this in the noon day sun, already
having been kicked out of the car
by a religious zealot in the worst
possible hitching spot, and when
Frank asked us to help him heave
the mound of flesh into the stove,
even the flies stopped buzzing for
a second, and so long was that
second before my ride answered
him that the flies legs melted
into the ~~heat~~ lesser heat of open
wounds on the carcass.

it was a Newfoundland - the biggest
cane in the world, although who
knew it'd get bigger when dead?
"ah, sorry, man, we gotta get our
hurry on," he said, finally.
only then did i breathe again.

③ A cocky asshole in a Lexus on
the 5 in OREGON NORTH OF Eugene.
it was hot as hell & an old hoBo
had been chilling on the ramp for
20 minutes, ~~chilling~~ sucking on
a 40, so i was working the
gas station below. but when he
bounced i skittered up the hill; glass,
rock & plastic crunching beneath
my feet. then this foot picks me
up - white dude, mid-50s. tells
me he doesn't pick up hitchhikers
because they are usually low-life
scum or drug addicts. he admonishes
me for my pronunciation of "eugene"
and tells me its "Southern California" &
i think, "no, it's so my uncle Eugene -
i say it the same as i say his name."
pompous prick.



Engine Whistle Signals

1	—
2	—
3	—
4	—
5	—
6	—
7	—
8	—
9	—
10	—
11	—
12	—
13	—
14	—

Indicates *Long* . Indicates *Short*

- WHEN STANDING BRAKES APPLIED
- RELEASE BRAKES PROCEED
- FLAGMAN PROTECT REAR OF TRAIN
- FLAGMAN MAY RETURN FROM WEST OR SOUTH
- FLAGMAN MAY RETURN FROM EAST OR NORTH
- PROTECT FRONT OF TRAIN
- ANSWER ANY SIGNAL NOT PROVIDED FOR
- BACK UP - IF RUNNING STOP AT NEXT STATION
- CALL FOR SIGNALS
- APPROACHING PUBLIC CROSSING
- GENERAL WARNING OF TRAIN COMING
- APPROACHING MEETING OR WAITING POINTS
- INSPECT TRAIN FOR STICKING BRAKES
- BURSTS OF SHORT = "EMERGENCY"

4 MAN IN MINI-VAN PICKS ME UP & IS SUPER NICE. he asks me if hitching is pretty tough these days.

i go off on my usual rant about how all these dumb asses driving around by themselves think hitchhikers are murderers & rapists because they have a vague recollection of seeing that in some movie. i mean, come on, who has ever even heard a story - a real story - about that? he listened & kindly shook his head like he agreed.

conversation moved on to other things & 20 miles down the road he pulled over to let me out, apologizing for not being able to take me farther but he had to pick up his wife & since her brother was killed a few years ago by someone he picked up thinking she is super uncomfortable with picking folks up! cops.

5 A dude driving a big ole work truck who, after being recruited in the parking LOT of WENDY'S (after a trucker on the way in declined to give me a ride, BUT OFFERED TO BUY ME A 5pc CHICKEN DINNER FROM KFC, WHICH I GRACIOUSLY DECLINED, HUNGRY AS I WAS) graciously picked up alex too, after i encouraged him too. No one else was going to pick that kid up. he sat ~~at~~ at the intersection with a dumb-ass meth-induced grin and a dumb-ass sign that looked like this:

SAN FRANCISCO PLEASE



when i approached him to ask if he minded if i worked the
Parking Lots (seeing as there were already 3 young to
RAMPERS ON the ON Ramp who were even more UN-Pic-
up-able than Alex) a woman pulled in screeched to a
stop, threw \$20 out the window and yelled, "Yeah!
Right on! I Love hitch hikers!" before speeding
off not even offering us a ride. Alex promptly
offered me 1/2 although the projectile money was
clearly aimed at him. i thought that was a pretty
decent thing to do so i convinced Top Truck guy to
pick up the goofiest & probably highest kid in
OREGON.

With Raver trio getting nowhere, i had decide
to take a ride back north 20 miles or so to engage
though. SURE as hell didn't want to be back in
that town. But it's best not to mess with baby raver
& seeing what i was already dealing with, hitchhike
out of Oregon was going to be MISERABLE.
i'd hop a freight instead.

X9043

and end
was a
Place
So

IT GOES LIKE THAT...
SOMETIMES WANTING TO
BE HYPNOTIZED BY THE
RHYTHM OF RAILS, RAILS, RAILS
WITH NO WAY TO MANIPULATE
THE DAY & NIGHT OR STIFLE WHAT
THE SKY TOSSES OUT, KNOWING THE NEAREST-
AND USUALLY THE ONLY - PERSON IS AT
THE OTHER END OF 80 CARS IN CONSTANT
(SLOW) MOTION, GLIDING THROUGH THE DESERT
MOUNTAINS, FOREST.

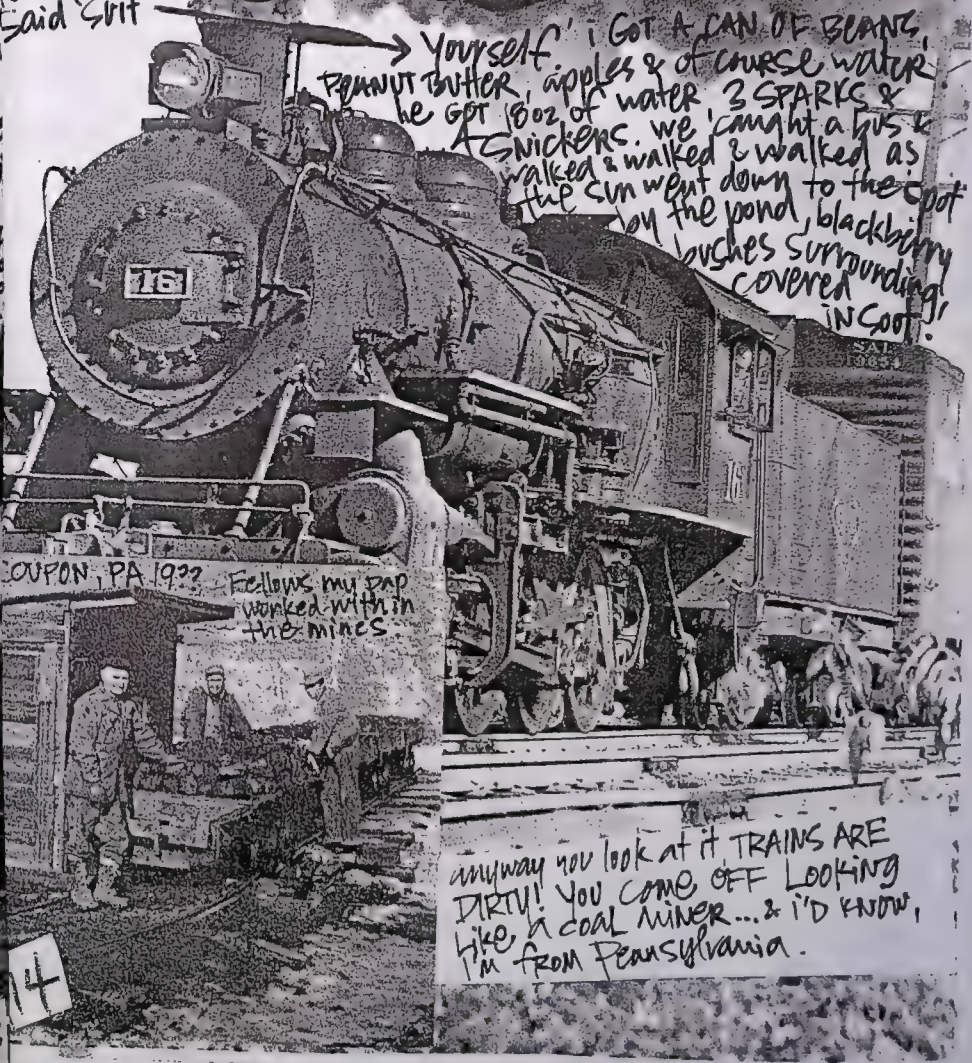
Alex hadn't hopped before so i offered to show him out.
we got supplies. he complained about having no
money after the dumpsters proved to be fruitless.

i told him
all he
really
needed
was water.

at least
a gallon.
i'd have 2
he said it was
too much & i
said 'shit'

AND THEN ALL OF SUDDEN, I MISS ALL
THOSE NUTS THAT PICK ME UP. I WANT
TO CHECK IN WITH THE COUNTRY AGAIN.
I WANT TO HAVE HOT WATER FOR TEA &
A BATHROOM THAT KNT FLYING BY AT
30MPH BENEATH ME.

→ Yourself' i got a can of BEANS,
PEANUT BUTTER, apples & of course water.
he got 18oz of water, 3 SPARKS &
A SNICKERS. we caught a bus &
walked & walked & walked as
the sun went down to the spot
by the pond, blackberry
bushes surrounding
covered
in COOT.



COUPON, PA 1932

Fellows my dad
worked within
the mines


anyway you look at it TRAINS ARE
DIRTY! YOU COME OFF LOOKING
like a coal miner... & i'd know,
i'm from Pennsylvania.

14

DURING OUR TREK TO THE CATCH-OUT SPOT, alex told me of his meth addiction & his developing taste for heroin. he'd gotten a taste while staying with a friend a woman who held down some corporate job, yet couldn't sleep through the night without getting up at least once for a hit - so far gone was she. i took this opportunity to learn all about the local drug economy & MANUFACTURING "INDUSTRY" IN THE CENTRAL CORRIDOR OF OREGON. THE IMPACT ON THE YOUTH OF THE REGION IS MASSIVE & OBVIOUS - ^{EVEN TO SOMEONE JUST TRAVELING THRU} i DECIDED THAT METH WAS JUST ABOUT THE nastiest DRUG AROUND. WILL THIS GENERATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE EVER RECOVER?

AT THE POND, I PRACTICALLY COLLAPSED INTO A BED OF BLACKBERRY BUSHES, FALLING INTO A FITFUL SLEEP INTERRUPTED BY THE SPRAYS OF GRAVEL AS alex involuntarily twitched or tossed throughout the night as he came down from his high... that & his voice as he talked his way through the process of UNROLLING all the cigarette butts he collected that day to REROLL the single tobacco into new, complete smokes.

IN THE MORNING, I GOT UP WITH THE FIRST LIGHT, ATE SOME BLACKBERRIES & FOUND A PAIR WORKER TO TALK TO. HE SAID THE NEXT SOUTH-BOUND TRAIL WOULDNT BE ALL LOGGING RACKS WASNT DUE FOR ANOTHER DAY OR A HALF. I DEBATED WITH MYSELF WHETHER TO TRUST HIM. HE SEEMED FRIENDLY ENOUGH & I KNEW I COULDN'T WAIT. NOT IN EUGENE. NOT WITH ALEX. I TUCKED MY GALLON OF WATER INTO THE BUSHES FOR THE NEXT RIDER TO FIND, HITCHED A RIDE TO THE BUS STATION & SAID GOODBYE TO ALEX.



i ended up at the same Spot near the
community college where i'd been hitching the
morning before. damn eugene. it wasnt even a
great Spot. BUT... it was the Spot where i
met ⑥ GLEN.

glen was a 40-something, white dude with
a bad hairpiece & inexplicably, a pseudo-
convertible, the wind constantly threatening to
expose his prematurely-bald head to one on the 5.
he, world-or at least any- each inquiry
'bout it,
len was a creep; he finished
th "huh, girly girl?" or "how
irly girl?" ugh.
he offered me a ride to the next town
where i'd escaped Raver-Nation the
ay before. i declined.
but here's the catch -
and here's how Glen crept into my life.
was going all the way to
eanside, just north of
ANDiego, the
next day.

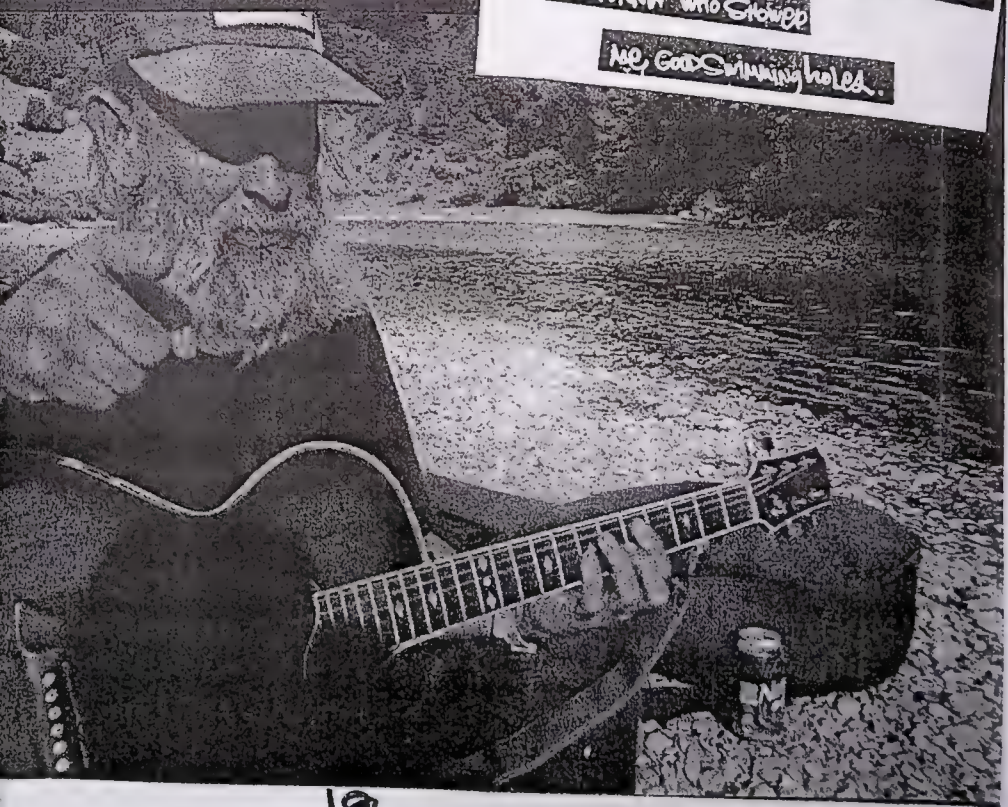
ANDiego was my
destination.

I got his number, tried unsuccessfully to hitchhike
as the sun went down the hill, so did I
to the Chevron station where a 16 yrd old
pumps your gas in between drags from his
cigarette. his mom works inside & sells
you beer & tells you there are no more
busses tonight not even to get to the
bar for after-PRIDE celebrations. so you
call people you haven't talked to in months
years until it's too late to call & you're the
only one awake for miles except for the
train conductor who is 7 hrs down the
track & will wake you up at 6am by
smashing along the tracks just feet from
your head where you sleep, black bear
brushes clinging to the sleeping bag in
the places it refused to cling to you
even though it was too hot for a sleeping
bag anyway. Glen was gross, chain smoker
and drove poorly. he was rude to the
driver thru worker at 4am & I almost
struck him. he got sketchy for a
while in Del Mar or maybe Oceanside where he
drove me first to the trailer park where
he lived & then walked me to my train

I refused to give him my number or take his
“thanks” was all I said as I climbed aboard.
Those were just a few of the rides &
like I said, Rach and I travelled well together
complimenting one another well even
when disaster struck like my blown up
infected finger in Salt Lake City, Utah, but
that's a story for another time.

of size,

FRANK - a vet & a find who i met in northern
CALIFORNIA who showed
me, good swimming holes.



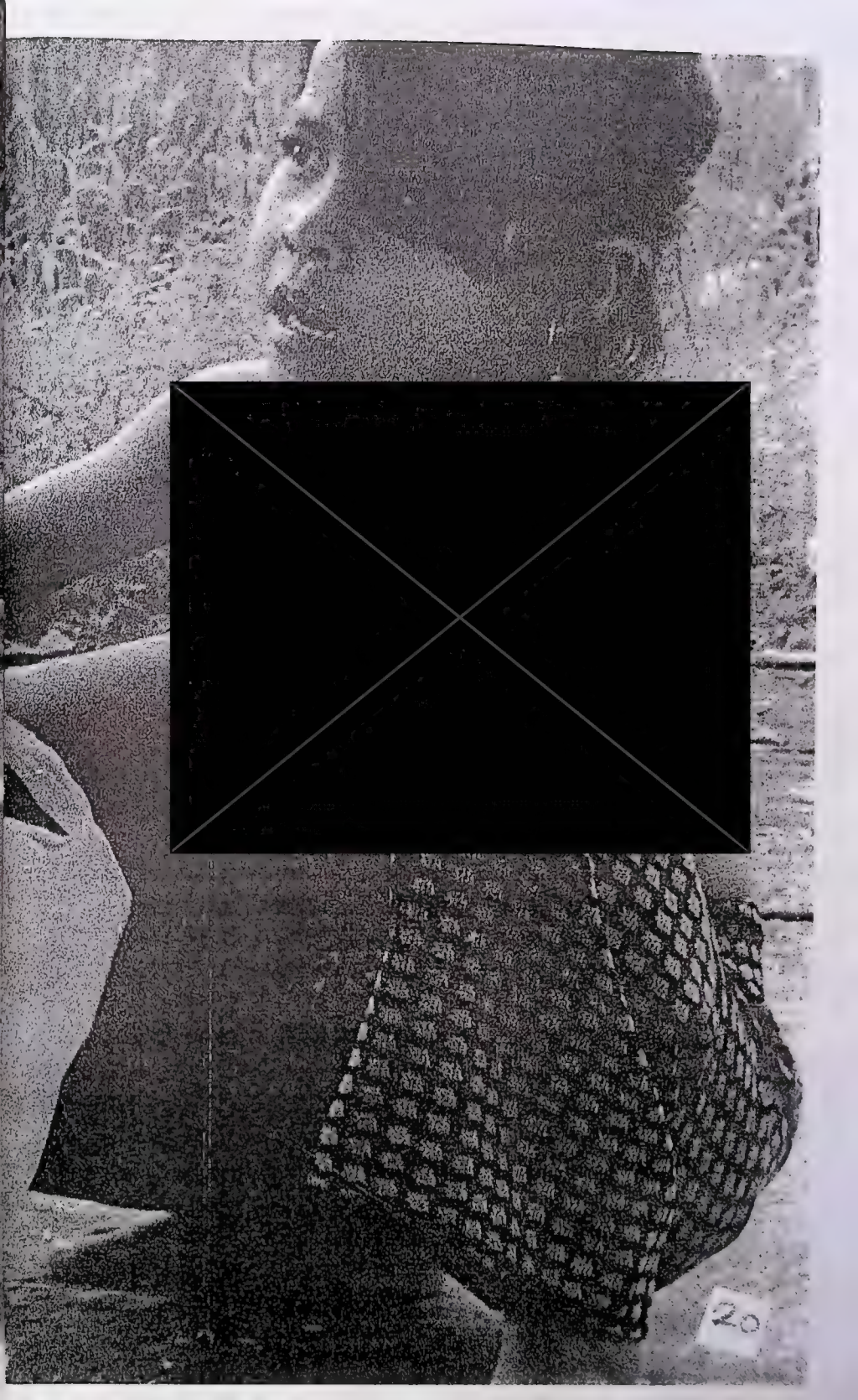
It's a Thursday night and I am sitting on the front porch at BWU (Burmese Women's Union...my home) as limeskinned geckos cling to the roof above my head, and lurch along the walls next to me. Contrary to common sense and just in line with Dr. Seuss, geckos squawk like birds in a painful flight. The scent of dried fish being fried in chilis and fish sauce wafts from the kitchen and I wrinkle up my nose before closing the front door. Though it is not the only unpleasant thing about living here, it is one of the few. The complete lack of personal space and the difficulty in creating personal time is another...oh yeah, and the dirt of toilet paper but I've learned the tricks for that.

After one month, my spot on the mat where I sleep slipped between the wall and 5-8 other bodies (depending on what day it is) seems to be getting smaller. The first night that that I woke up with the dead weight of a leg compressing my abdomen, I have to admit, I was a bit amused. But now the sprawling limbs compete to butcher my sleep with the voracious mosquitoes and the 6am revelie-style announcements that spittle and crackle in Thai from loudspeakers all over the neighborhood. Then of course, there is the mysterious ear-bug that I have been warned about, though fortunately not encountered. Apparently there are little work/snake/centipede-like creatures that lurk under your pillow until just the right moment before skittering into your ear, eating your ear drum and causing permanent deafness. When my housemates described this pernicious and stealthy creature as being glow-in-the-dark green and red, I thought it was all a big farce, but the Burmese do not seem to be practical jokers, so I check beneath my rolled up sweatshirt (my pillow) each night in self-conscious paranoia.

It is a really fantastic opportunity to share meals, conversations, and all of life with such brilliant, dedicated young women, but it can be quite stifling when coming from a very individualistic culture such as ours. Because the community living around the clinic is composed almost exclusively of Burmese refugees who are susceptible to summary deportation by the Thai police (who patrol the area with the attitude of dog-catchers), there is a self-imposed 9pm curfew. If two or three medics get detained or deported for not having the necessary documents, the clinic suffers a serious blow. So, I'm back in 7th grade with a 9pm curfew.

In truth, Mae Sot is a pretty seedy place. By day, the markets bustle and rickshaws piled precariously high with eggs and papayas, chickens and pigs, morning glory and bamboo attest to the prolific trade that makes Mae Sot the commercial center of the region.

Letter
from
Mae Sot,
Thailand
2 August 2000



But the night whispers an entirely different priority for the town.

Mae Sot is a ten minute cycle from Myawaddy, Burma

and

the two towns act in SD/Tijuana-style complicity for trafficking

across the border.

With about 16 brothels, a booming textile

industry (including that of Champion brand clothing) and a

demand for the opium that has quietly become one of

Burma's biggest exports (after the regime nationalized

<read: stole>

peasants' farmland and converted it into government-

poppy fields), goods trafficked include drugs



illegal timber cuts,

jade and jewels,

and

humans.

Young women are bought

and sold into sex-slavery.

Refugees are blackmailed into working

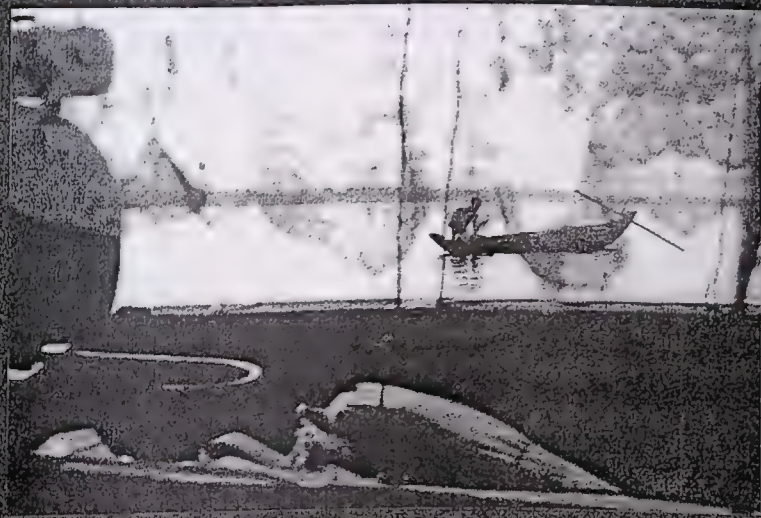
in the textile factories for six month stints, during which they

are unpaid. At the end of six months, the Thai or Chinese factory

owner summons the Thai immigration official to arrest, fine and

deport the workers. A convenient business strategy.

Mae Sot is neither quaint, nor charming and its seething underbelly seems in no danger of being gutted any time soon. Thai and Burmese officials score vast profits from their silent complicity in all of this so there is no hope of legislative means stemming the corruption. The only way the situation will be altered is if the refugees are educated, empowered, and economically stable enough to avoid exploitation. But then, who would be next?



When my 30-day tourist visa expired a few weeks ago, I made the obligatory "visa run" to the Burmese border. For 500 Baht (10USD), one can cross the newly built "friendship bridge" between Mae Sot and Myawaddy, get a few passport stamps from the kind, corrupt, Burmese immigration officials and waltz back into Thailand for 30 more days. I did not linger in Burma, though next time I will venture into the town a bit more to get the completely inaccurate and carefully constructed image of Burma that the military regime has painstakingly designed for visitors. It is impossible to spend the night in Burma—visiting hours are from 6am to 6pm and travel is limited to a few streets in Myawaddy. It is possible to fly into Rangoon, the capital, and visit two or three designated "tourist destinations" for up to two weeks, but foreigners are forbidden from using or even carrying Burmese currency. US dollars, Euros and government-issued tourist notes (aptly referred to as "monopoly money") are permitted exclusively. It is a brilliant scheme masterminded by the SPDC to ensure that every penny spent by tourists will go directly to the regime, since it is illegal (and punishable by LONG prison terms) for Burmese to use these currencies. So, as much as I would like to travel into Burma to get a better understanding of what is going on there, I simply cannot justify supporting the SPDC as a means for

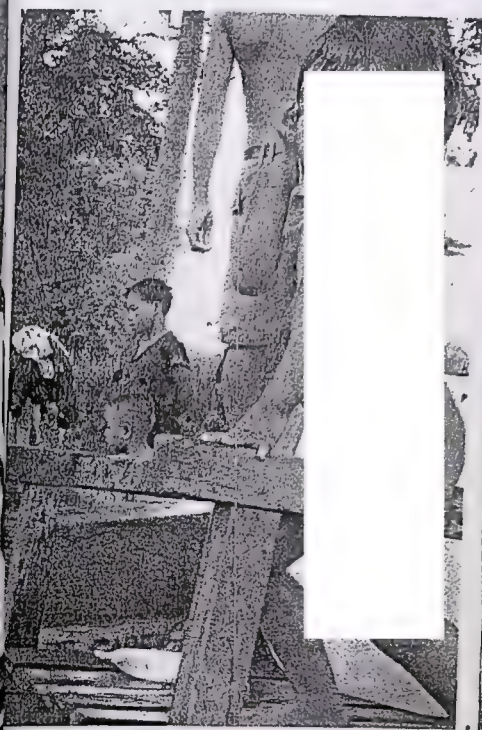
facilitating my own travel, no matter how educational. If we only spent our money ethically, I think we would find that it is one of the biggest tools for social change, no matter how much I do not want to admit this. But if everyone stopped buying Champion, I doubt these factories would stay open much longer, and if real sanctions were imposed against Burma, how long could the regime stay in power?

To get back to the border crossing—the images captured in my mind are not the of the postcard variety. As I strolled across the 200 meter, cement behemoth of a bridge—that odd, gray thing growing out of the jungle—I looked down at the frothing Moei River below. A group of women scrubbed rip-off Nike shirts and hand-sewn longyis on flat rocks along the litter-strewn, muddy bank. A child bathed in water dirtier than his skin. And all down the river before it yawed and curved around the steep hillsides eventually disappearing into the jungle, heads bobbed in the water, arms pushing against the strong current in an unsteady path toward each bank. People were going both ways, in and out of Burma. A middle-aged woman swam, tugging a large plastic bag (inflated for floatation) of cheap toys and cheaper clothing to sell in Thailand. She pulled her panting body—fully clothed but unshod—from the water, and crawled through the mud and up the slippery bank by tugging thin whispers of onion grass. Others did the same all down the river, making their daily commute to and from the job that would keep them out of the factories, the regime's army, and the risky but profitable occupation of trafficking. Children slogged through the ochre mud, digging through trash for small treasures. And I walked on, paid my money, got my stamps and walked back to watch more swimmers—my shield (passport) in hand—while pondering the cruelty of chance.

Each day I ride my rickety bicycle through the pock-marked streets and see children holding lines of string baited with flies into the gutters. Even though it is well known that the soil and water of Mae Sot contains levels of cadmium (a disastrous by-product of nearby mining) over 100 times higher than the minimum amount to be considered poisonous, the poorest refugees haven't got a choice. They pull fish—often warped, disfigured and always with bellies full of cadmium—from the ditches lining the roads, from discharge pipes, from the foamed and famed Moei. They grow patches of poisoned vegetables and harvest deadly rice. Cadmium is killing the poor, slowly...but starvation only takes 60 days, so they choose the longer road to the same inevitable, agonizing death. To see people suffer like this makes me think of how bad it must be in Burma. Here in Mae Sot, life is neither easy, comfortable or safe for refugees. Yet it must be better, in some unfathomable way, than their lives in Burma.

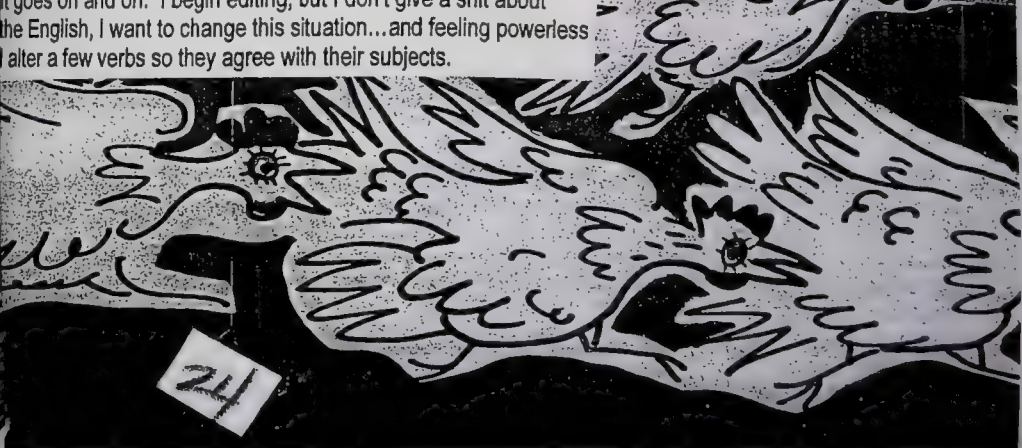
One of my students recently asked me to edit a report she wrote for the clinic files. I gladly agreed and began proof-reading the story or Pan Phyu, a all-too-typical story of the children who come to the clinic:

(A 7 3 1 1)



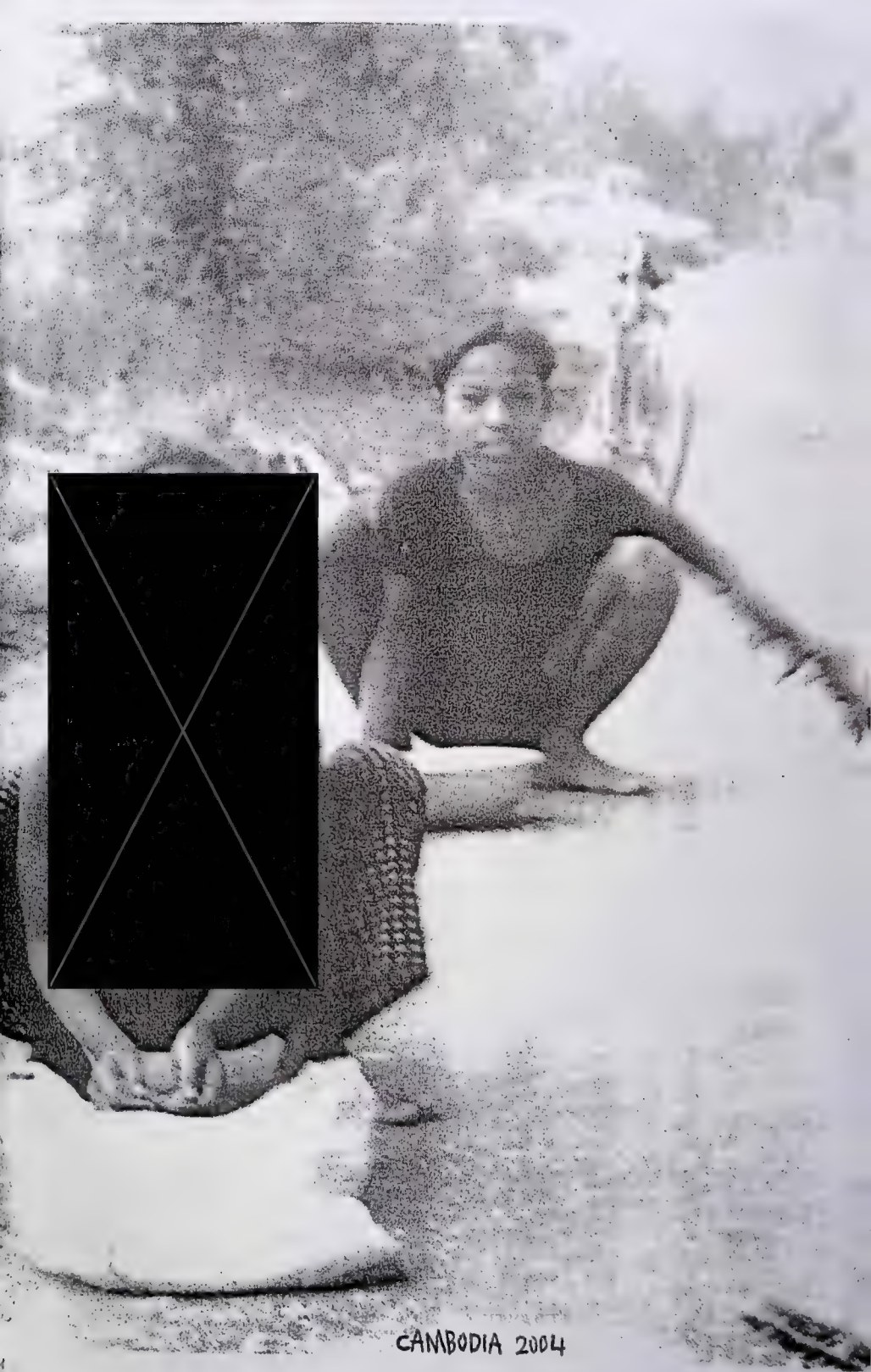
"Pan Phyu, one year, seven month old girl. Skinny with sunken eyes, Pan Phyu have diarrhea and she pass stool and vomit with worms 3-4 times every day. Skin lesions. Her mother doesn't know about nurlotion and she fed her with the superstitious cures of her culture. Pan Phyu weigh 11 lbs. when she come to clinic. She has five siblings and two sisters dead before eight months old. She drink from dirty bottles. Her mother can no make breast milk from time she born...."

It goes on and on. I begin editing, but I don't give a shit about the English, I want to change this situation...and feeling powerless I alter a few verbs so they agree with their subjects.

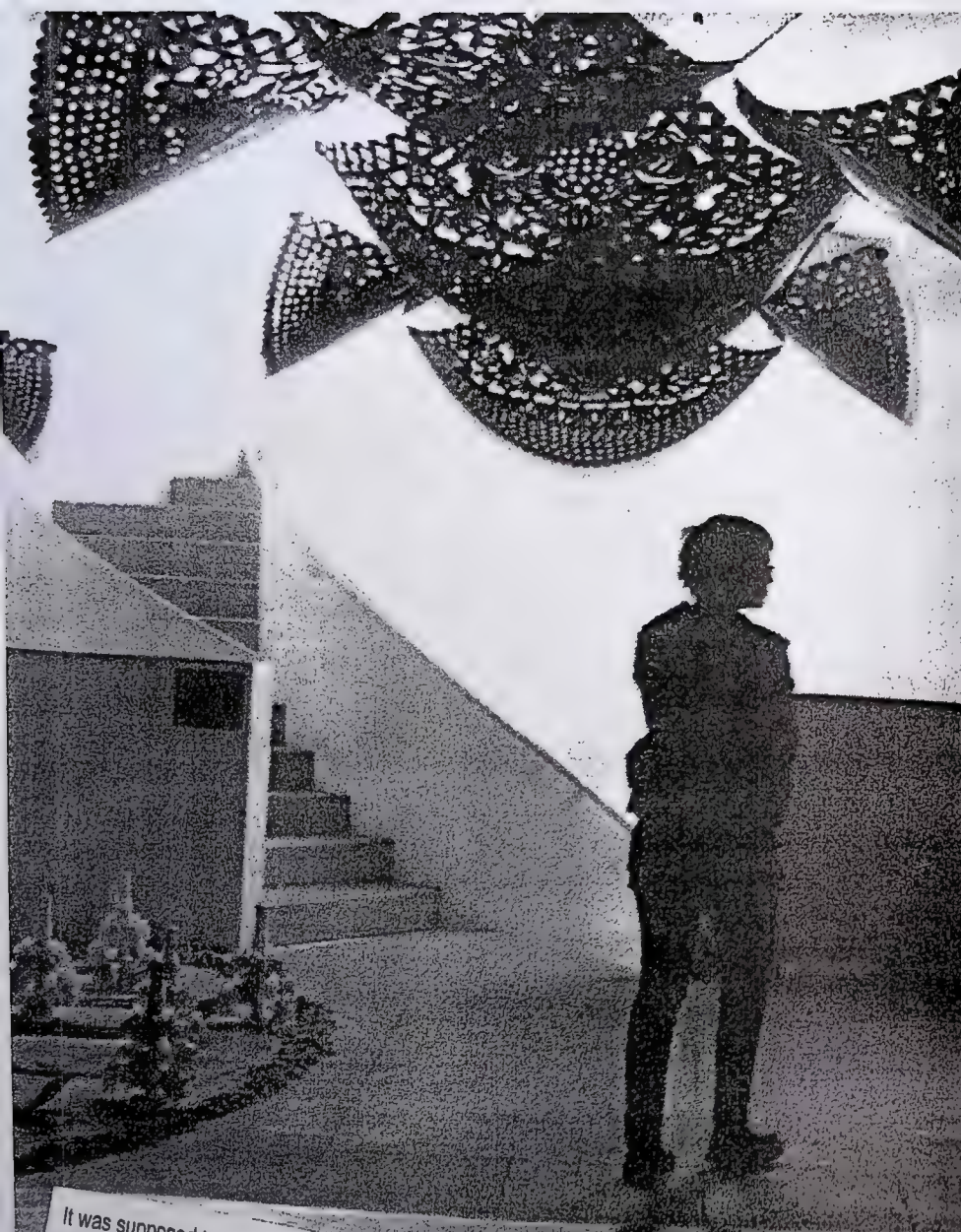


24





CAMBODIA 2004



It was supposed to be a month-long road trip from San Diego to Ebensburg, Pennsylvania...and back. Oh yeah, and for free. You know, one of those rare opportunities when someone (in this case, my sister) needs their car to be on the other side of the country, for whatever reasons folks got for that sort of thing. But who can take a month off of work and in the meantime, make ends meet, pay bills, do whatever you gotta do to get by? Well, in my family (and probably whole damn zip code), that's me. It's not that I don't do anything, it's just that I don't really spend much money, I've fastidiously avoided debt, and I keep the needs simple. It's not that I don't spend it cuz I don't got it sorta thing...

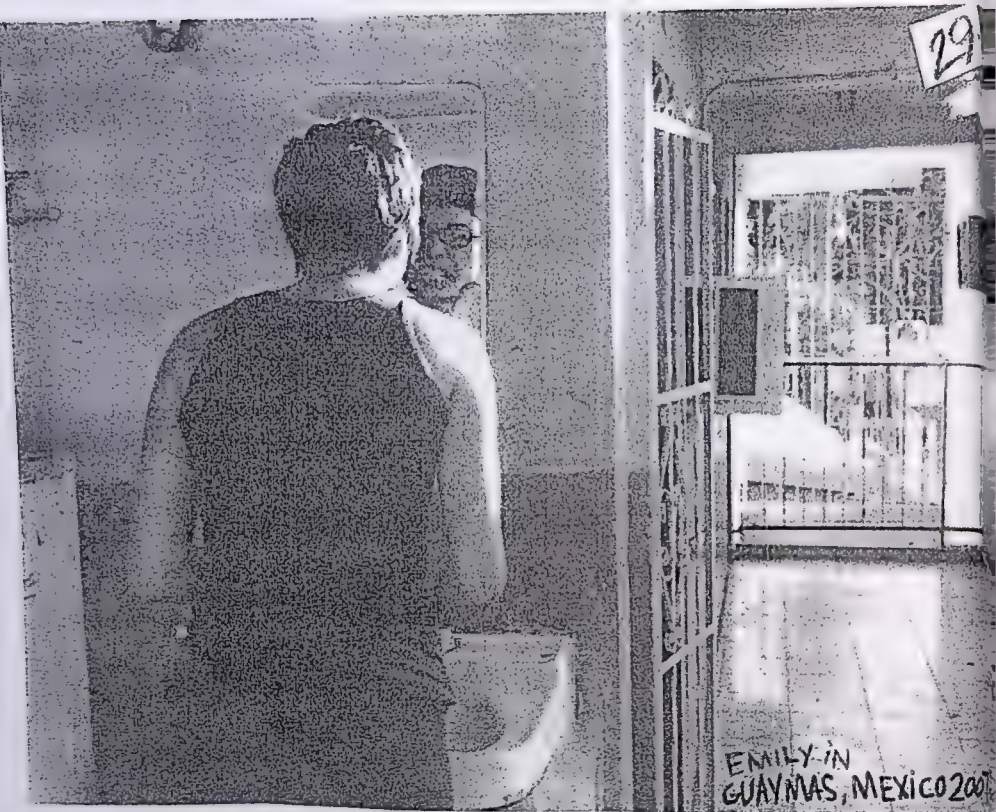
MEXICO CITY 207 ENERO

27

I spend time like some spend money...when they are buying it, I'm growing it, sewing it, building it, borrowing it, salvaging it or just doing without



Which means I ain't tied down to a payment schedule or living paycheck to paycheck. I've always saved for traveling, ever since I was a kid. But anyway, if you were paying attention, you caught on to those third and fourth words...yeah, supposed to. My sister "changed her mind" at the last minute, and another minute later I decided I'd still take a trip, though it would start on the trolley instead. You see, my 'mana lives in San Diego, fifteen miles from a mean mean wall of cement with razor wire ripping out the top of it like some sort of mechanical blackberry vine that reaches toward flesh instead of sunshine, the stain of a pocketful of berries replaced by the bright blood of migrants. Except see, I already had the fruit...I already had opportunity and privilege simply because I was born on one side of that wall—the right side they say. I had only to stroll through a turnstile and there I was, in México.



My friend, Ems, had joined me for the trip. We spent three weeks riding (passenger) trains, busses and in the back of pick-up trucks on roads and rails that disappear into the desert and cut into the sides of las sierras madres like open wounds that scars over with crusted dirt and bleed each time it rains, a red rich blood soil. And maybe if I had taken that road trip, the easy driving with the radio on scan and the mile signs slinking by like seconds that stall on a watch that you watch closely...thinking the damn thing is broken because the wand waits so long before marking off each second—five four three two one—but before you know it, the thing has done a 360 and you gotta wonder what just happened with all that time. If I had taken that roadtrip, I'm not sure I'd be writing this at all. Because traveling through the States in a car that I'm driving, taking highway to highway in this place that some say is my home, well, it just doesn't get me all wound up like it used to. It did at one time; it did when I was eighteen and first took that greyhound three days across the country to California, high on too much Jack Kerouac, the day after I graduated high school. Three days later the day I rolled into LA and wondered what the hell I was doing? But that...that was what? Seven years ago?

But today I start writing because in those seven years I have spent a lot of time on the roads the rails the waterways the airways the ways that we create for ourselves to just keep the momentum of movement. And I write now because I am so damn conflicted;

I am so in love and so in hate with this thing I call traveling.

And I can't get it outa my head because I know I can't take another step outside of the Bay until I figure some of this shit out. Traveling has enriched, facilitated and defined my education in so many ways. These experiences have also been some of the hardest, loneliest, most soul-searching, demeaning, frustrating and fabulously mind-fucking of my life. And no, I don't know where to begin with that either, but maybe a train in Italy is a good place to start this journey, not because it was the first experience that ripped me out of my already flexible and wide comfort zone...but because it's on my mind.

MY
BUBBA. 1967
she passed away
last year. ♡



I had been living in Napoli, in the south of Italy for three months or so, getting up on my Italian so that I could romantically search out living relatives of my pap—my nonno, my grandfather—whose parents came from Italy on a boat to work in the coal mines of western Pennsylvania. Pap always wanted to go back, but my bubba had for a long long time not been in the best health... I don't know if that was really the reason... I mean, I think it's more about people needed or feeling a need to travel than them having a reason *not* to travel, because everyone has a fistful of those. And maybe this trip was really about a search for some kind of identity that I could latch onto because if you're white, and maybe even if you're not, you probably know what it's like to be part of this mass without origin—this desire to have roots that maybe stretch under water for a bit, but at least start somewhere... it's not that I think I'm Italian or something like that... and hell, my pap isn't even biologically related to me. So maybe it was more for Pap than me.

30

MY PAP IN
ITALY DURING
HIS TIME IN
THE SERVICE.
(he's in the middle.)



47-159

Point is, I'm on this train—a passenger train because I had, at that time, never conceived of freights or free rides. It was 2001 and after finding some of my folks in Castillo di Cigleglio, I was riding through the north on my way to Croatia to visit Barbara, a friend I had made in Roma. Her family lived outside of Zagreb and I would stay with them and visit Barbara on the Croatian coast for a while.

It was late late at night, or early early in the morning. I needed to write and so as others snored in the darkened cavities within, I carried pen and notepad to the artificially lit space between train cars and hung out the window while penning whatever was on my mind at that point. Problem is, this space is next to the bathroom and if you are up getting drunk all night on the train, you are apt to need to piss. Well, they had to piss. But they were interested in doing more than just that. They couldn't be content with dealing with that specific bodily function; they wanted to deal with other, more sensual ones. It started as a friendly conversation in my broken Italian and their slurring banter.

Did I want to have sex with them?

No.

Didn't I like sex?

Sure.

They why didn't I want to have sex with them both, in the bathroom?

Stop touching me.

Come on, but you're so pretty and we can make you feel good.

Get the fuck off me. If you touch me again, I will start shouting and you'll get kicked off the train.

One of them tried to grab my breast.

I didn't shout.

I kneed him, swift and hard, in the groin and when the other grabbed me by the neck and started pulling me toward the bathroom that locks from the inside, I still didn't yell, but I gashed his face with my nails and in his drunken, unbalanced state, easily toppled him to the floor, stomping on his arm that reached for me, maybe breaking his wrist or hand or at least a finger. I didn't wait around to know for sure.

I left them there like that, adrenalin pumping, abandoning my tablet but welding my pen like a knife, I ran down the hall, grabbed my bag and as the train slowed, pushed past the train worker yelling at me that it wasn't possible to get off the train because it wasn't going to stop; I didn't wait for the stop. I stepped off the train, skidding along the pavement that dug into my palms and chin with gravel that went no deeper than the fear that pulsed in my veins. I was in Bologna.

I spent the night in a tunnel wrapped around a payphone where I deceived myself into the comfort that I'd have someone to call if anymore shit went down. I didn't and it didn't... Instead a homeless man passed by and offered me a piece of bread and politely walked on after I hissed at him to get away. The sun and light of the next day came warmer and brighter than I'd even experienced the simple rotation of the earth, and I was in good spirits. I've learned that if you come out of a situation

like that alright and unhurt, you did the right thing. You can think about what you could've done better, what you should have done, how you should have not even gotten into that situation; but if you come out okay, you did the right thing. I believe that. And you don't got to be in another country or a space unfamiliar to you to experience that shit... this I know.

I got jumped here in Oakland not that long ago, seven big dudes, two teams of them—5 and 2—that tried to knock me off my bike and honestly, I don't know what else. It was 1am and I was on a not dark, not isolated, not back alley...it just happened. But I got out—didn't even lose my shit which was the least of my worries—but I fought my way out and into okay. And when I finally had the courage to tell my folks, the courage to relive that shitty, shaking experience by uttering the words that made it come alive, they told me I shouldn't have been there, I shouldn't have been riding alone, down that street, at night. Uh, you know what, I *should* be able to ride my bike wherever and whenever the hell I want without fearing bodily harm. I did nothing wrong. You did nothing wrong. And then I got berated for not calling the cops to report it, but what the hell are they going to do? And what the hell would I have told them? With adrenalin and the strong desire to survive much greater than the desire to provide an accurate statement to the cops, the only description I could have offered was number, my interpretation of race, and my interpretation of gender. And knowing the violence that goes down in the streets of Oakland at the hands of the authorities, that is not enough for me to contribute to the stereotyping and profiling, harassment and violence against young black males in this society. I wasn't about to aid and abet. And in the end, I think that's what hurt me the most...not the incident itself, although it *was* a good eight months before I could ride my bike at night without being on ultra-alert, stressed and uncomfortable, but the messages I got from friends and family that this was somehow my fault. And that discomfort stuck with me...maybe because I believed them that I could have prevented this...sure, if I had only stayed in my apartment at night and not ventured out to experience life, yeah, maybe I could have prevented it. I've always been a big reader...maybe I should just live through that. It's bullshit. That saved me years ago when I lived in my parents' house and couldn't go anywhere or when I was 16 and living through the dark dark dark winter of Stockholm, Sweden where the sun only shows her face for 2-4 hours a day and I holed up in the library to transport myself through words elsewhere, but that doesn't work for me anymore. I wasn't going to stay inside. Even after getting jumped, I knew I had to challenge my fears, ride my bike, get on with it. I had support from friends who would make unspoken plans to meet me at my place, no matter how far outa their way, before riding on to our mutual destination. But that shit will eat you up. If you give in to that fear, what else do you have? I am just happy knowing that fear is often followed by a healthy perception and admittance of risk for me.



But fear takes time to transform itself,
healing with the SCAR OF KNOWLEDGE
& LIVED EXPERIENCE in its own time.
A couple years ago, Danny & I got
shot at for trying to squat an
old abandoned farm building in
Portugal. The next week we
slept in the eucalyptus forests of
Portalegre, waiting for the
grape farmer whose vineyard
wed' work on for the next month
to get back to town. Those
nights in the forest, hidden far
far away from anyones sight &
in fact, on a hill so steep
and dense that it was certain
thered be no tappers - by those
nights were plagued by our
imagination. Perhaps the fact
that we were steadily
sliding down the hill
did not help, but wed
awake with a start & then
forced in absolute still-
ness & silence until our
muscles ached to be
shifted or released.
We didnt even acknowledge
the idiocy of sleeping in
a eucalyptus grove.
that shit was introduced
to Portugal with its
fine sandy soil that
couldnt really
support the quick-
growing brittle bones
of Australian
Eucalyptus.

we were more likely to get crushed by a branch that
simply gave up than anyone looking to mess with us.



CASAVIEJAS, SEVILLA, ESPAÑA
COMMUNITY SQUAT

BUT EXPERIENCE
FEEDS *fear*,
GROWS *fear*
IMPLANTS *fear*.


fear
BECOMES
TRANSPLANTED
DEEP INSIDE
LIKE AN ORGAN
THE BODY WANTS
TO REJECT.

BUT REJECTION
OF THE ORGAN
MEANS POSSIBLE
DEATH.

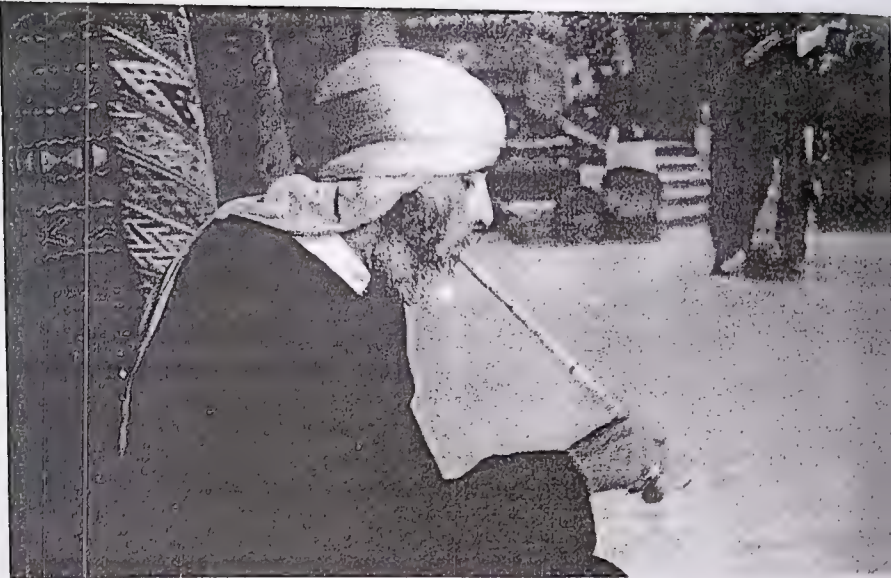
... AS IF DEATH IS
NOT ALREADY A
CERTAINTY.

EACH OF US MUST DECIDE
WHETHER ITS BETTER TO
GO BY A ROTTING BRANCH
OR BY ROTTING IN BED

FOR FEAR, THE
ORGAN PUMPING
HESITATION INTO EACH
HEARTBEAT, WILL
BEGIN TO ATTACK
THE OTHERS, NAMELY
THE HEART &
SOUL UNTIL
FEAR IS
ALL
THAT IS
LEFT



But I digress; this has nothing to do with travel *except for the fact that it doesn't* and that is important in my mind... these experiences can be ours whether we are in our own homes or not. I fucken cry nearly every time I read a newspaper... the senselessness of this world, the pain folks suffer, the wars that are waged without end, the disaster that may be natural but that very unnaturally affects some more than others. But traveling, I get to see that first hand, and I still cry. I've been told I'm crazy, but more productively, I've been told I feel things very strongly. And it's true... maybe both, I don't know and I don't really care because if crazy means giving a shit about things that don't directly affect me, caring about the well-being of strangers and strange places, I'll wear that label proudly. I've also been told by someone who had been trained in articulateness that I am extraordinarily empathetic and that I take on other people's pain readily and often because I feel incapable of stopping it. So I assume it. Maybe not the healthiest thing, but it makes me feel alive. It makes me feel, sometimes anyway, like a decent human being. I've also been told that in order to survive and "succeed" that I must not do this, that I must be able to turn the switch off, to delineate between family members and lovers, who it's apparently okay to feel pain for, but that I had to stop caring so much about everyone and everything else in this world. I've been told that by every single institutionalized structure in which I've participated, from school to church to community. And I think it's bullshit. In fact, I know it is.



But because I do get to see first hand when I travel does not mean I *experience* first hand. Because I did get to spend a week with Abdul and Fatima in Tanglers, the folks who treated me like life-long friends or family or whoever it is that is supposed to treat you with respect, generosity, acceptance, and love... that doesn't mean that each night I spent with them in the shack they had built on top off a tenement apartment building that could be torn down any day, that I knew what their lives were like. Because I shared beers with Abdul doesn't mean I know the havoc that his alcoholism reeks upon his family or because I watched as Fatima cooked over the single burner of her stove that very much resembled the camping stove that I carried in my backpack, that I know what it's like to worry about where the gas will come from next. No, I knew even if I couldn't find the gas I needed (which was often) that if I did find it I could buy it, and that's a very different story. And if I didn't, I had to only hear the grumbings of my own stomach and not those of another whose life I was responsible for.



This whole concept of seeing versus experiencing isn't always so clear for a lot of folks. We can go somewhere and experience what folks are experiencing who live there, but only ever to an extent. I lived on the Thai/Burma border for four months in a house with 13-16 refugee women from Burma, and I ate the same rationed food, slept on the same wood floor, and shit, even got eaten up by mosquitoes worse than they did, contracting both malaria and dengue fever in that short period of time. Yeah, I lived exactly as they did, physically... but I did not have to deal with the mental trauma of fearing to leave the house, knowing that if I got picked up without documents (which none of them had and which was clearly projected on their facial features, darkened skin tone and even clothing styles that distinctly differed from that of document-holding, rights-bearing Thai women) I could and probably would be deported, before or after being raped, beaten or even killed. No, that wasn't really on my mind even as I lost weight from eating our rationed meals of rice, oil, salt and whatever vegetables could be harvested or bought.

I knew that my skin was my documentation.

If ever questioned, I could assume a righteous indignation that invoked the power of my privilege as a white, U.S. citizen... and I could get results.

I could call an embassy, but the women I lived with didn't even come from a country or state recognized by "authorities", seeing as they were of ethnic minorities that the national government was trying and is trying to exterminate. Even I had been living for years unsupported financially by anyone, I could call parents who could find a way to buy a plane ticket or something, when most of them didn't even know where their parents were, or if they were even alive.



ANY
I CAN
STREET

ENOUGH...

the distinction is
vital to recognize.

when you go to Chicago
OR GUATEMALA OR DARFUR

OR WHEREVER it's trendy

BE AN ACTIVIST these days

REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

& what privileges you bear - on

YOUR SKIN from YOUR tongue &

in YOUR wallet. whether you WANT

them OR NOT is UNimportant - YOU

HAVE PRIVILEGE. So deal with it

this isn't a diatribe, meant to discourage

folks from traveling, especially folks

who I consider part of my

community - folks who are dedicated

to social justice & have good

intentions.

BUT it is a reminder to especially

those folks, to all of us, that

intentions are NOT everything.

Let's think more critically & honestly

about who we are, where we come

from & what our motivations are.

Before we pack our privilege in a backpack

& board the next plane, train or

thumbtack ride.

THAILAND 2004

38

What is the

driving force behind your intentions?

Is it a recognition of privilege and an attempt to use that
privilege to make a world where rights are never privileges,

or is it an attempt to feel better about

having all that privilege?

and of this privilege, what do
you offer up?

Did you ever offer yourself up to helping by mopping floors or

providing childcare while folks organizing in their own communities do their thing? What do you have

to offer? Are you limited to only what you think your skills are

or are you

open to offering what folks ask of you? This is my question for myself and all of you, all of us.

29



BADAJOS SPAIN 2004



TOMATO PLANT
IN MY BACKYARD
OAKLAND,
CA
2006

I take a few moments to write this and already I feel that I must be missing something. Just outside the window there are fields laden with gigantic, belching toads that might emit the day's last belches before I am through. Or I might not be there when the cherries pass imperceptibly into the deep burgundy of ripeness. The dragonflies hang in the air on slivers of silver and yellow-spotted slugs stretch five inches long, oozing over my toes if I sit still long enough. There are the snakes, like ribbons, woven through the tall grasses; ants, ants in all sizes and colors climbing up my arms to investigate while others move larvae and heaps of eggs like spoonfuls of couscous; metallic-backed beetles mating on elderberry stems; swallows diving fork-tailed like kites through openings in the sky and plunging kamikaze-style to the earth until, when just inches from the ground, their wings catch air all in one movement and they exit through the same opening of sky that they entered; butterflies, locusts, grasshoppers (some pink and green as bursting watermelons), opal-shelled snails, blue-headed lizards, salamanders, thumb-sized bumblebees, grubs and slugs, worms long as snakes and baby snakes like too-quick worms. The farm is alive, every square foot of topsoil supporting some 1500 creatures I am told—just the top inch! Then there are the kittens and the puppy tumbling over themselves like so much youth and why have I been oblivious to all of this for so long? Danny and I have been here on this farm for two weeks, sufficiently long enough for my self-awareness—that which separates us from all other animals, supposedly—to have significantly degenerated. After watching perhaps five dozen translucent, bluish spiders emerge from a spongy, spherical egg case (that their mother has been dragging along with her hind legs for weeks) and then scramble on her back—all of them, on top of each other like a surging, riotous crowd—and be carried away, clinging with instinct, it is easy to forget your own name. I feel like a child again, my curiosity sending me scrambling indiscriminately from insect, to tree, to cloud watching, giggling when giant raindrops plop on my nose. It is only Danny and I here in our house made of straw bales (2 story, running water and electricity, if you can imagine). George and Anke are the only permanent human residents of farm and we see them often and share meals with them, but mostly we are left to ourselves. We are practically alone here, but I see and sense so much more life that can be found in the largest of cities with their millions of walking dead. I do not think about much of anything here other than what is directly before my eyes. There is no past, no future...only the right now, which is the most important time in any of our lives anyhow. The only time my mind strays from the here and now is when dusk dampens the air and the fireflies blink like floating buoys, bouncing on waves as far as the eye can see. The days are

hot, but in the evening great cumulous clouds roll in and I feel eight years old again, chasing "lightning bugs" with my sister or wrapped in a blanket on my grandma's porch with mom, watching lightning splinter the sky in western Pennsylvania (which annually hosts the best summers in the world).

But away from these reveries and this minutia...onto the seemingly less important main points. The farm: we are in mainland Greece, in the south near the coast, surrounded by orange groves that flank the river for miles. We spend a few hours each day planting asparagus, papaya, celeriac and endive, clearing away vines from the peach, orange, pomegranate, and bay trees and pulling plump fruit from the bowing limbs of cherry trees that we eagerly scramble up. Somehow,

this is considered work and in exchange we have a home and hot meals as "pay". The farm is vegan/organic—an anomaly, as most organic farms still use animal products like bonemeal and manure as fertilizers. It is a not-for-profit cooperative and though not very large, the farm produces over 200 different fruits, vegetable, herbs, nuts and beans, and an abundance of stinging nettle. Anke made a pot of nettle soup to eat after I got stung badly one day...the burning subsided within an hour.



NETTLES

(*Urtica* species; *Laportea* species)

These annual or perennial native and European herbaceous plants are distinctive for many reasons, as you'd quickly discover if you ever encountered them wearing shorts. Nettles are covered with tiny, nearly invisible stinging hairs that produce an intense, stinging pain, followed by redness and skin irritation. The generic name comes from the Latin word *uro*, "I burn." Nevertheless, they're superb, nonstinging cooked vegetables.

Nettles usually appear in the same places year after year. Look for them in rich soil, disturbed habitats, moist woodlands, thickets, along rivers, and along partially shaded trails. They grow throughout most of the United States. Here are a few of the most common species:

Stinging nettle's (*Urtica dioica*) rather stout, ribbed, hollow stem grows 2 to 4 feet tall. The somewhat oval, long-stalked, dark-green, opposite leaves are a few inches long, with a rough, papery texture, and very coarse teeth. The leaf tip is pointed, and its base is heart-shaped.

This is a dioecious plant, with male and female flowers growing on separate plants. The species name, *dioica*, means "two households" in Greek. By late spring, some plants have clusters of tiny, green female flowers hanging from the leaf axils

Wood nettle (*Laportea canadensis*) has fewer stinging hairs. The leaves are alternate rather than opposite—larger and wider, with more rounded bases than the ones stinging nettles have. Wood nettle has flower clusters on top as well as in the leaf axils. Other true nettle species are also edible.

You'd think the stinging hairs would make nettle identification easy. Nevertheless, I once ran into some people in the woods who insisted that clearweed (*Pilea pumila*), a similar-looking, nonpoisonous relative, with a translucent stem and no stinging hairs, was stinging nettles. They had been eating this nontoxic plant, which I had always rejected as unpalatable, all summer.

Sometimes nettles grow near catnip, another similar-looking plant. Mints, of course, have no stinging hairs, and catnip is fragrant. Catnip and nettles are an excellent combination for herb tea.

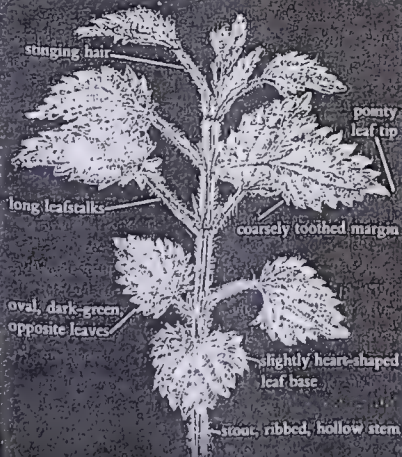
Collect nettle leaves before they flower in spring. They may be bad for the kidneys after they

flower. New nettles come up in the fall, and you can pick them before they're killed by frost.

People have been using nettles for food, medicine, fiber, and dyes since the Bronze Age. Collect them using work gloves, and wear a long-sleeved shirt. If you happen upon nettles when you have no gloves, put your hand inside a bag. The young leaves are the best part of the plant. They come off most easily if you strip them counter-intuitively: from the top down.

Whenever any of my groups find nettles, I announce that someone will volunteer to get stung, to demonstrate how jewelweed (page 73) cures the rash. Sure enough, someone accidentally gets stung, and we cure it. Once I was the careless one who got stung, but I kept my mouth shut and treated myself surreptitiously. Plantain and dock (pages 227 and 236) also work. Surprisingly, some people (masochists?) actually find nettle stings invigorating, and use them to wake up the body. Some Pacific Northwest Indians stung themselves with nettles to stay awake during long whaling voyages. The watchman was allowed to use healing herbs on his many stings only after a whale was sighted.

I have to travel quite a distance to find a place



STINGING NETTLE SHOOT × ½

in paired strands. Other plants possess diagonally upright male flower strands, poised at the tops of the plants. Slender nettle (*Urtica gracilis*) is similar, with sparse stinging hairs and slender, opposite leaves.



where they grow like "weeds." As you can imagine, I pick in quantity, steam them, freeze them, put them in soups, stews, and other dishes. I dry them, tincture them in alcohol, and sometimes get stung by them. They get used up quickly—everyone loves them—and I'm back at the nettle patch.

Clean and chop nettles wearing rubber gloves. Once you've cooked them a little, the stingers are deactivated, and the plant becomes edible.

Nettles have a bad reputation as an unpleasant-tasting survival food in some circles. That's because people don't know how to prepare them. They often boil them, which is awful. Nettle leaves are good simmered in soups 5 to 10 minutes, but my favorite method is the waterless steaming method, recommended for spinach in a 1699 cookbook by John Evelyn, and described in the cooking section, page 281.

I enjoy nettles as a vegetable side dish with rice and beans. Sometimes I make creamed nettles—much more satisfying than creamed spinach. Because nettles have the richest, hardest taste of any green, I often combine them with lighter ingredients, such as celery, zucchini, lemon juice, or tomato sauce.

I also dry nettles for winter use and tea. Sitting here writing this book, I frequently sip on warm nettle tea. It's one of my favorites. It doesn't taste like a normal tea—not bitter, spicy, minty, or lemony. It's more like a strong stock of a rich, deep, green plant essence, and it's one of the most nourishing drinks of all. Whenever I feel run-down, tired, or even irritable, I make myself some.

As food, this tonic is good for rebuilding the system of chronically ill people. Nineteenth-century literature is full of "constitutionally weak" people, who usually die on the last page. In Russia, they were given freshly squeezed nettle juice—a tonic loaded with iron and other nutrients—for iron-deficiency anemia. This often worked.

Many of the benefits are due to the plant's very high levels of minerals, especially calcium, magnesium, iron, potassium, phosphorus, manganese, silica, iodine, silicon, sodium, and sulfur. They also provide chlorophyll and tannin, and they're a good source of vitamin C, beta carotene, and B-complex vitamins. Nettles also have high levels of easily absorbable amino acids. They're 10 percent protein, more than any other vegetable.

The substances in the stingers have medicinal uses. In the late 1980s, scientists studying the differences between dried and freeze-dried herbs accidentally discovered that freeze-dried nettles cured one of the researcher's hay fever. Subsequently, a randomized double-blind study at the National College of Naturopathic Medicine in Portland, Oregon, showed that 58 percent of hay-fever sufferers given freeze-dried nettles rated it moderately to highly effective. Nettles are a traditional food for people with allergies.

Nettles sting you because the hairs are filled with formic acid, histamine, acetylcholine, serotonin, 5-hydroxytryptamine, and unknown compounds. Some of these substances are destroyed by cooking, steeping, or drying, but not by freeze-drying or juicing. Unfortunately, you need a vacuum chamber to freeze-dry herbs. However, you can purchase freeze-dried nettles in capsules for hay fever.

As an expectorant, it's recommended for asthma, mucus conditions of the lungs, and chronic coughs. Nettle tincture is also used for flu, colds, bronchitis, and pneumonia.

An infusion is a safe, gentle diuretic—considered a restorative for the kidneys and bladder, and used for cystitis and nephritis. It's also recommended for weight loss, but you may shed more pounds of water than fat.

Nettle-leaf compresses or finely powdered dried nettles are also good for wounds, cuts, stings, and burns. The infusion was also used internally to stop excessive menstruation, bleeding from hemorrhages, bloody coughs, nosebleeds, and bloody urine. It helps blood clot, but major bleeding is dangerous—indicative of a serious underlying condition. Consult a competent practitioner in such cases. Use home remedies for minor cuts.

Other uses include treating gout, glandular diseases, poor circulation, enlarged spleen, diarrhea and dysentery, worms, intestinal and colon disorders, and hemorrhoids. Nettles are usually used along with other herbs that target the affected organs.

German researchers are using nettle-root extracts for prostate cancer, and Russian scientists are experimenting with nettle-leaf tincture for hepatitis and gallbladder inflammation.

Eating nettles or drinking the tea makes your

hair brighter, thicker, and shinier, and makes your skin clearer and healthier—good for eczema and other skin conditions. Commercial hair- and skin-care products in health-food stores often list stinging nettle as an ingredient. Nettles have cleansing and antiseptic properties, so the tea is also good in facial steams and rinses.

Nettles' long, fibrous stems were important in Europe for weaving, cloth making, cordage, and even paper. Native Americans used them for embroidery, fishnets, and other crafts. You can even extract a yellow dye from the roots.

Nettle tea is given to house plants to help them grow, but the strangest use I've ever heard is for severe arthritis. You must whip the victim over most of the body until an extensive rash develops. This flagellation or "urtication" may stimulate the weak organs, muscles, nerves, and lymphatic system, and increase circulation. Or maybe it causes so much pain, the victim forgets about the arthritis.

44

I woke up most certainly to car alarms, trash collectors & near head-on collisions. ~~OR~~ OR I woke up from Jose knocking/pounding on the door at 9am to have Angi & I tell him once more that we didn't want our room cleaned over. We preferred to do it ourselves, especially if the only other option was to be up & out by 9am for someone else, a perfect stranger nonetheless, to pull Angi's long red hairs from the bathroom sink & wipe the rings from under our glasses. ~~see~~ it was more of a hotel than an apartment, though we tried to take the latter. We stayed a month & Angi much longer, each time leaving or entering being forced to ring for the elevator & the kind man who worked in it, taking us down 2 flights of steps (or maybe 3) that we would have happily traversed on foot instead of cable had they not. Been barricaded on the 2nd floor. We could have walked at least to that floor but what an insult to the elevator man to pick us up just feet above his head. ~~with~~ⁱⁿ our little kitchen area we stored poblanos, garlic onion and papas & in the fridge, queso oaxaca, tortillas from the morning before, and vegetables, fruit never stayed around long enough to be stored anywhere. We each had a double bed with scratchy top cover uprivitors from Motel 6 to Mexico that I immediately balled up & shoved under the bed for the duration of the stay. We stacked our few books on the round glass table next to the phone book & weekly Entertainment guide with circled gay bars & questionable activities.

the truth is, we were a bit lonely & a bit

bored with ourselves - and perhaps each other.
that night we decided to go all out & actually
pay the 60 pesos to get into LIPS for ladies night
or maybe it was Lipsick. I don't remember. We
bought a couple of beers from the oxco downstairs
clanking the flip bottles together on the way
back up the elevator while chatting with eduardo
my favorite of the 2 elevator guys, about
our plans for the evening. we were living
pretty cheap in the hotel/apartment off hidalgo
that was undergoing renovation. Sometimes i
think we were the only ones staying there & if
it was probably some sort of construction code
violation that anyone was. Anyway, it was to be
DTG night out in Mexico City, so we prepared
accordingly. i had just shaved my head and i put
a fake deer shirt & the blue pants i wore
every day, looking like a pretty man with boots.
mugi, on the other hand, patched up her tight
slit on a skirt & strapped on some shoes making
her legs all hot. we drank our beers, talked shit &
played cards until it was sufficiently late to be
almost ridiculous to think about going out.
pee. sweater. money. metro token. lets go.

we get to the club & it's swanky as fuck, but damn
that place was so full of women - and huge as hell
everyone up on the third floor. we aren't there for
more than a minute when i notice that there is
one dude in the whole place - and he's staring at
me. and he's still staring at me. we get overpriced
drinks & i look over to where i saw him last &
now i'm pissed because in the only one in the
whole place that has a shaved head & this
fool doesn't know that clearly means i'm gay.
as hell and why the fuck is he whispering to
his friends next to him and why are they
grinning?! then it gets worse. like a true

gay boy he strides - not walks - up to me, the
crowd parting before him like some biblical
shit, stops before me a foot away and a foot
taller and declares...

"you are Sinead o'conner."

it was not a question. he was barely smiling, but if he
was, it was coy... and proud... it felt like hours passing...

"yeah, and i'm her manager. can i help you?"
augi had stepped out from behind me and now
stood between me & arrogant gawking boy.

i laughed like "ha ha, okay kids, that's enough
of this silly game", not wanting to be caught in a
lie, or worse yet, believing a lie.

but arrogant gawking boy was now giggling and
telling me in english how amazing it was that i
was there and he loved my music & wouldn't i
sing something later?

i drank my drink fast as augi rambled on about
something having to do with ireland, which is where
i, sinead, am from of course. did she pick up
an accent? i don't remember but my suspicions are
yes. this all goes on for a few minutes & i'm
standing there doing a really bad job at being a
much loved pop star when boy breaks into song

"but no tttting compays, &
no tttting compays... tooo
& yooooouuuu." & i am a fake.

and i know it's over. i know he gets it but in all
his glorious generosity of heart & perhaps
vain glorious arrogance, he doesn't let on. ~~for~~ for
he sees opportunity. he sees the chance to
glide around the club, introducing the

not really androgynous, but sufficiently ambiguous
everyone - hopes - is - a - lesbian, melancholy, tortured
Rock star to every beautiful woman in the place
and therefore, he gets to be the star, winning the
admiration & attention he gets from men & women
alike at everywhere but a gay bar or girls' night.

So that's what he did. and maybe it was the
alcohol or maybe it was the simple & pure, almost
childlike, desire to believe that one's dreams could
come true [Sinead O'Connor was in SA House!] but
there were definitely some believers & some others
who wanted so desperately to believe that they
overlooked the fact, in their heart of hearts, that i
look absolutely nothing like Sinead O'Connor, save the
Bald head. &

One woman cried. Another kissed me. In fact
several kissed me, but i'm not sure if that had anything
to do with the celestity thing. People up in there
seemed to be all about making out.

"Oh, Sha-need, me encanta your music.
Por favor, listen to me. mi vida, mi life, you
change et. Oh, Sha-need esta aqui...
espera, espera... mis amigas..."

It usually went something like that until i tired of
the shamesness & by 3am, no one really cared
anymore. Angi & i caught a cab home
despite all portegay advice that repeatedly
& emphatically advised us against it.
it was not the first, nor the last, of
many a cab ride in Mexico City. And lucky
for you, i still live to tell about it.

today it hit me hard.

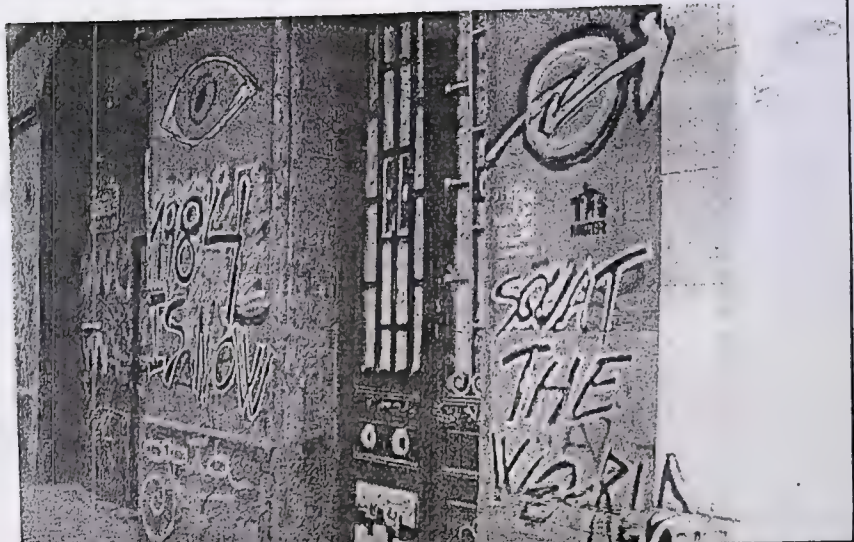
i got off the phone with danny and feeling
sad, i embarked on a journey
into the bustle of the bangkok.

first down the river on a raucous ride over the coffee and milk

colored water. the ride itself was not terrifying, i suppose, but jumping from the pier onto the still moving boat was quite unnerving. the water might be quite dirty, but there were fish the size of skateboards that writhed in the deep waters near the dock. i made it to my stop about 4 miles down the river and found the general post office where i sent a letter. then it was walking, walking, walking and i had all these things on my list to see and do and buy, but i didn't get shit done. i got a foot-ache instead. and that's when it really hit me...the jetlag. i was fucking beat from my little bout of insomnia last night and there i was, standing on a sidewalk with cars drowning out the remnants of my very unclear thoughts. there was a vendor beside me selling all these fried fish and some kind of bird claws and snakes to eat, and that was it. i tried to find a bus route that would bring me back home and i ended up walking most of the way. i came back to the hostel and had a bowl of spicy noodles at a stall outside. i layed slaughtered on the bed and slept for three hours. Nothing has reached my brain yet, but instead the city clings to the inside of my nose, rumbles in my stomach and clings sticky to my skin.

WILKIN9 SUGAR CANE
CAMBODIA 2004

49



Yesterday I spent 11 hours in the airport in Zurich. I wrote this:

Another end, another beginning, and all the world will not collectively change pace and linger in order that the transition might be smooth. Life seems to unfasten itself from me when I begin to stagger. There is no use marking time in any one position for as soon as I mark this day, it has passed and if I am not already tomorrow, then I am lost. Danny and I said goodbye this morning. For six months we have not been more than a moment's walk from each other (at most), and now just two hours after I watched him melt into a mass boarding a plane to NYC, the distance had ballooned to

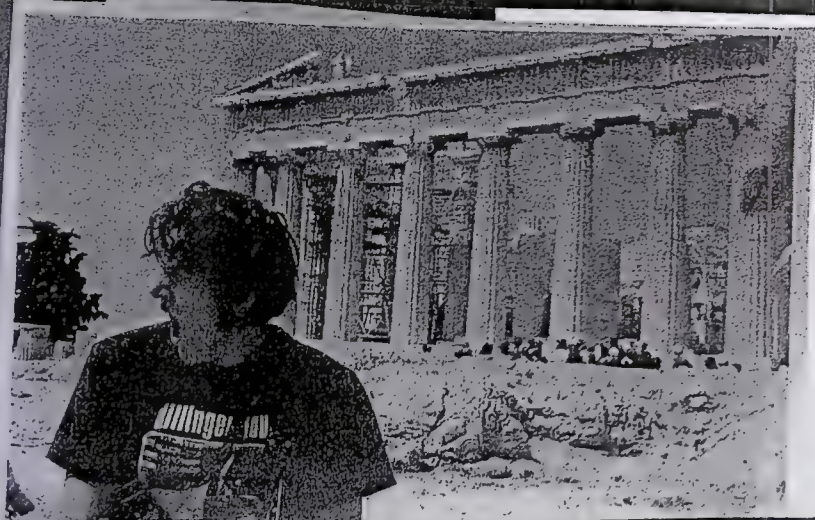


somewhere near 1200 miles. Just like that. What do you say to someone with whom you have just shared the world? I said thank you and walked zombie-like to an empty row of plastic chairs where I still sit, hours later. It will be difficult; it IS difficult already. He might have boarded that plane, but six months worth of love, lessons and memories is still wrapped in my mind. And I write about this moment knowing it has passed before the thought metamorphoses to words on paper. I am already dealing with this differently.

A big change, and big changes still to come. Tonight I fly to Bangkok. I am weary with anticipation and though I tell myself that I am too seasoned to allow my mind to wrap itself around preconceptions that will surely prove to be misconceptions, tremors of excitement send images shimmering before by blank stare. I do not know what to expect, but I look forward to whatever it may be. There is not much time to reflect before moving on, but I am certain that the past six months will manifest its influence on my actions, beliefs and opinions for much time to come.

The past month was one of the most beautiful of my life. After leaving Arta Biologica (the vegan organic farm in Greece), Danny and I met up with an old friend from my firefighting days in Colorado. We met Leah at the airport in Athens and then the three of us dove headfirst into the maddening city. Athens is all chaos and no charm.

The constant throb of construction work has entered the city's bloodstream, pulsating at all hours in preparation for August's (Olympic) games. Great machines eat and spit equal amounts of pavement and I wonder if there were any navigable roads at all before this past



DANIEL
JOHN
ATHENS
Greece
2004

Amid all of this, much of the ruins (including the Parthenon) are covered in scaffolding as awkward as braces on a child's smile. The ruins seemed nothing more than an anachronistic tourist attraction, which I suppose is all they really can be in such an abrasive atmosphere. Two days there and then we caught the first ferry out, not caring where it was going so long as it was away from Athens. We ended up on Crete early the next morning and tried our luck on a random bus which took us to the south shore of the island. Leah swore she could see Africa. We hiked a seaside path through wild oregano and brush while families of wild goats watched us follow the steep cliffs down to the pebbles of Sweetwater Beach. We camped there for a week with a handful of nudists, expatriates and escapists who had made their home on the quarter-mile ribbon of soft stones stretched between cliffs and sea. The beach is an hour's hike from the nearest village (a village only accessible by boat and foot) and seemed a million miles away from tourist hordes. We swam, read, day-hiked in nearby gorges, slept, got sunburnt, talked, chased the many wild goats from our food basket, drank from the fresh water spring that runs into the sea, played cards, and at night created our own constellations in the sky untouched by ambient light. If I had been ready--or willing--to escape society for good, or even to simply give up or forget, I would still be at Sweetwater.

^{when we} We were both flying out of Switzerland so from Greece is was back to it
caught a punk show and some Italian HC at a squatted municipal building turned venue/community center. Against Me! started playing until 2am and the vino was flowing freely. Afterwards the small crowd oozed into the street for a few more hours before dawn spilled into the sky. Danny and I didn't have a place to stay for the night and nor did the bands. Sure enough around 4 or so we were all hustled off to someone's house where 16 of us crashed on floors, couches and every space in between.

It was SO good to hear music once again and especially to see a show. We have suffered through six months with little more than radio crap and on one farm, a few tapes of which 'Rythym is a Dancer' and 'Come on Eileen'. But, like all things, being without music has made me appreciate it so much more.

And now, here I am in Switzerland, a place both infinitely beautiful and equally expensive. I do not think I could afford another day. Danny and I slept on the pavement in front of the tiny Lugano airport last night and tonight I will be crunched up in a too-small airline seat. On to Bangkok. I will be in the city for a few days before moving north where I will be volunteering for three months with a Burmese refugee support organization. If I can get the right visa I will be in a refugee camp for the three months, pretty much cut off from the rest of the world for a while. If not, I will be in a village or small town.

All I know is that I am looking forward to not being a tourist anymore. I cannot travel like this anymore. Danny and I avoid highly touristed places, towns and communities with an almost religious zeal.

Though the tourist industry brings much welcomed wealth to many areas, it does so at the expense of those communities' non-pecuniary wealth...the customs, the culture, traditions and most of all, sustainability. Trades that have sustained families and entire communities for entire generations—namely agriculture—are exchanged for a future in the more lucrative but less stable tourist industry.

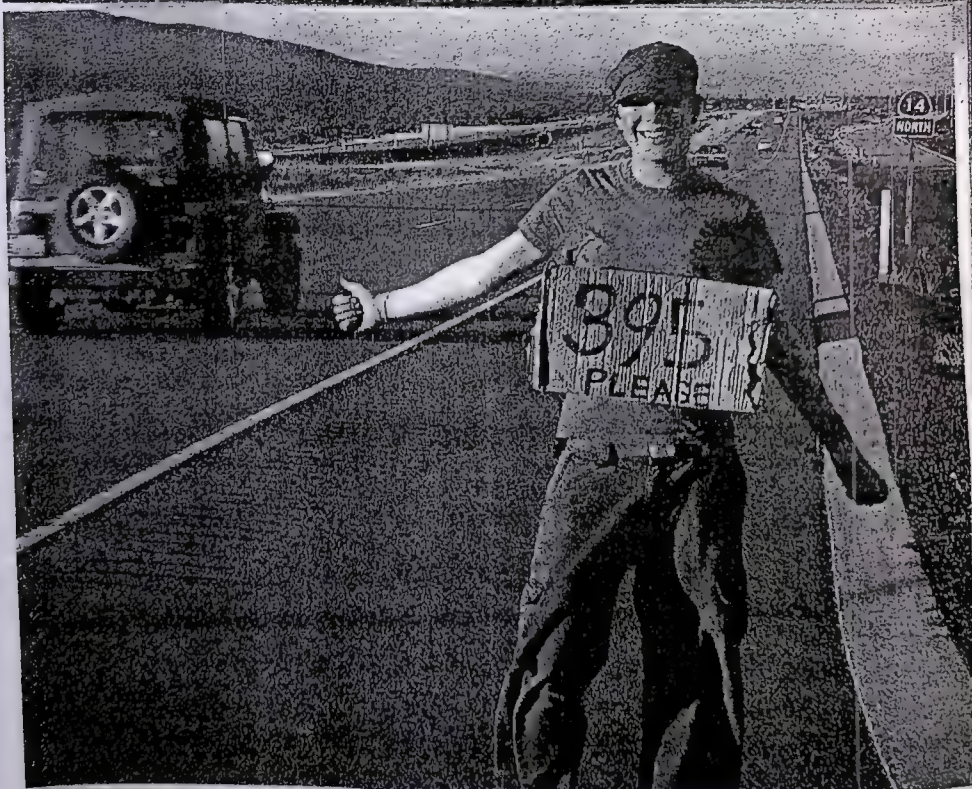
Anywhere we go, even as backpackers, we cannot help but contribute to this...the auctioning off of customs and cultural integrity to moneyed tourists.

I am not comfortable with the relationship between tourist (or traveler) and local peoples. It just seems such an unhealthy relationship with very little dignity for the latter who ends up 'serving' the former. Traveling to me is very important, but traveling ethically is more important. This is one of the many, many reasons why I will be staying put for a while here in Thailand. I want to give something back to account for so much that I have taken while on this trip.

__june 16, 2004__

52

Rachel, my partner in crime a lot of the time,



kitches like a pro. 2006, CALIFORNIA

ABDUL AND FATIMA LIVED IN A TENEMENT-LIKE SHACK ON TOP OF AN ONLY SLIGHTLY MORE STRUCTURALLY SOUND APARTMENT BUILDING. THEY SHARED ONE ROOM FOR SLEEPING & LIVING, WITH THEIR 9 YR OLD SON MOHAMMED SAID, WITH A SMALL SPACE FOR COOKING OVER THE STOVE THAT DID NOT LOOK DISSIMILAR FROM OURS, ONLY THEIRS USED A KEROSENE MIX. DAMN, AND I HAD TRIED TO BUY FUEL FOR OUR STOVE, EARLIER THAT DAY & FAILED WHEN THE ATTENDANTS AT THE GAS STATION IN THE MIDDLE OF TAMJINE WOULDNT FILL UP OUR PLASTIC, EMPTY ORANGE SODA BOTTLE WITH UNLEADED. WE TRIED 2 OR 3 PLACES, SPENDING THE ENTIRE DAY TRAVELING FROM STATION TO STATION, WITH OUR ONLY DIRECTIONS COMING FROM POINTED FINGERS & HOPELESS STREETS. PEOPLE WERE KIND, NO DOUBT, AND TRIED TO HELP US IN MORE WAYS THAN WE WANTED. WE WERE THE DUMB ASHOLE AMERICANS WHO DIDNT SPEAK ENOUGH ARABIC TO EVEN SAY GAS OR PLEASE. HELLO. WE COULD MANAGE. AND ALSO GOODBYE WHICH IS MORE OF AN "MAY ALLAH BE WITH YOU" SO IT PROBABLY SOUNDED SOMETHING LIKE THIS EVERY TIME WE APPROACHED SOMEONE:

"hello. kistpd lvs mmskn gyr ctftrre gas. ilvm yfrnd dnvbt i dnthk ic gas trlvwth hm gnrmy."
~~may allah be with you~~ quizzical look.

"may allah be with you."

the end.

THIS HAD BEEN AN ONGOING SEARCH, BEGINNING IN PORTUGAL & TRACKING US THROUGH SPAIN. I HAD ACQUIRED US A WHITE GAS UNIVERSAL STOVE INSTEAD OF THE BUTANE-PROPANE MIX Ours I USUALLY USE. THIS WAS THE ULTIMATE INTERNATIONAL INTERNATIONAL! THAT'S RIGHT. IT WAS THE STOVE FOR THIS TRIP SINCE WHEREVER WE WENT, WE'D ^{JUST} BE SURE TO FIND WHITE GAS OR IF NOT SOMETHING WITH A HIGH ENOUGH ALCOHOL OR COMBUSTIBLE RATE TO BURN... INCLUDING JET FUEL (ALWAYS IN ABUNDANCE), VODKA (NOT IN MOROCCO!) AND OF COURSE SOME TRUSTY GASOLINE, ALTHOUGH THE LATTER WAS TO BE USED ONLY IN SMALL AMOUNTS BECAUSE THAT SHIT IS FILLY & EASILY CLOGS THE FUEL TUBES. WELL, AFTER ALMOST GETTING A FEW HILLSIDES & OURSELVES ON FIRE MUCH TO THE DISMAY OF THE PERPETUALLY STARING PORTUGUESE, WE WERE DESPERATE. GASOLINE IT WAS.

AT THEIR HOME, ABDUL TOLD US STORIES OF HIS DAY EXCITINGLY PRACTICING HIS ENGLISH WHILE FATIMA SHYLY SMILED & SMOKED HER MARLBOROS, UNROLLED & REROLLED SANS FILTER, STUFFED WITH WEED

she preferred to smoke it over the ~~brush~~ ^{brush} ~~abdul~~ packed into neat little bowls (i'm talking pinkie size) at the end of the traditional Moroccan long pipe. mostly everyone we met smoked hash here & there with the mint tea they drank almost constantly - a pot of nearly boiling water poured into another pot ~~stuffed~~ ^{stuffed} with fresh mint stalks so tight the water had to bend & slide into the spaces between the leaves, pressing the air out in a steady gurggle. then copious amounts of sugar are added & the tea is served in tiny, quickly refilled glasses after allowing to sit for several minutes.

Fatima, slowly becoming more comfortable with danny and i after a few previous visits, began talking more in her unconfident but unflinching English when abdul ran to the store to get beer. she showed me a picture of her on her wedding day, her strong calloused golden hands glowing brighter than the dull shine of sparkling faux-gold frame trembling in her grip. we talked about her choice to wear the head & full body-covering jellabah & veil, similar to the burkha but often secured differently. then, in an act of utmost pride and generosity, she pulled 2 jellabahas from the closet/bathroom and encouraged me to try them on. one was her mother's. i resisted. not feeling right. "oh, thank you, but no... no... i can't." she begged me to try them on & when she began slipping the large piece of gold threaded & ivory patterned cloth over my head, i tucked in my arms to make it easier. she gently ~~pushed~~ ^{pushed} my hand back from my oily forehead, after pausing for a second to establish consent with my eyes & gave my face a ~~chance~~ ^{chance} to prepare itself for her touch. she pinned my hair back & asked me to stand up, telling me how beautiful i looked. mohammed said giggled, danny took a picture and i felt dizzy from the flash.

abdul returned & danny & i recounted our adventures of the day at the various gas stations we visited.

"you need gasoline? okay. i get you gasoline. mohammed Said... and then he broke off into arabic.

"ok. mohammed takes you. i have a friend with motorcycle shop ~~just~~ down the street. go. mohammed goes with you."

mohammed said, in his brown, straight legged pants &

HITCHING TIPS:

if possible, it's nice to have a friend.
be assertive! make the first move & assert agency by asking your would-be ride where they are going before they ask you. you always have choice & agency. Remember that. Turn a ride down by saying a) "oh, i'm looking for a longer ride" or b) "nah, i need to change highways up ahead", or simply "NO, thanks" which is always enough. don't settle for less than your standards.

go where international tourists go - especially Europeans are prone to pick you up, although they often go only short distances with many stops along the way.

if people are asking you "aren't you afraid to hitchhike?" or "what if i was a murderer or Rapist?" i usually respond (and recommend)

"NO, i know how to defend myself very well.

i handle my knife just fine" or my favorite,

"Yeah right. The second anyone tried

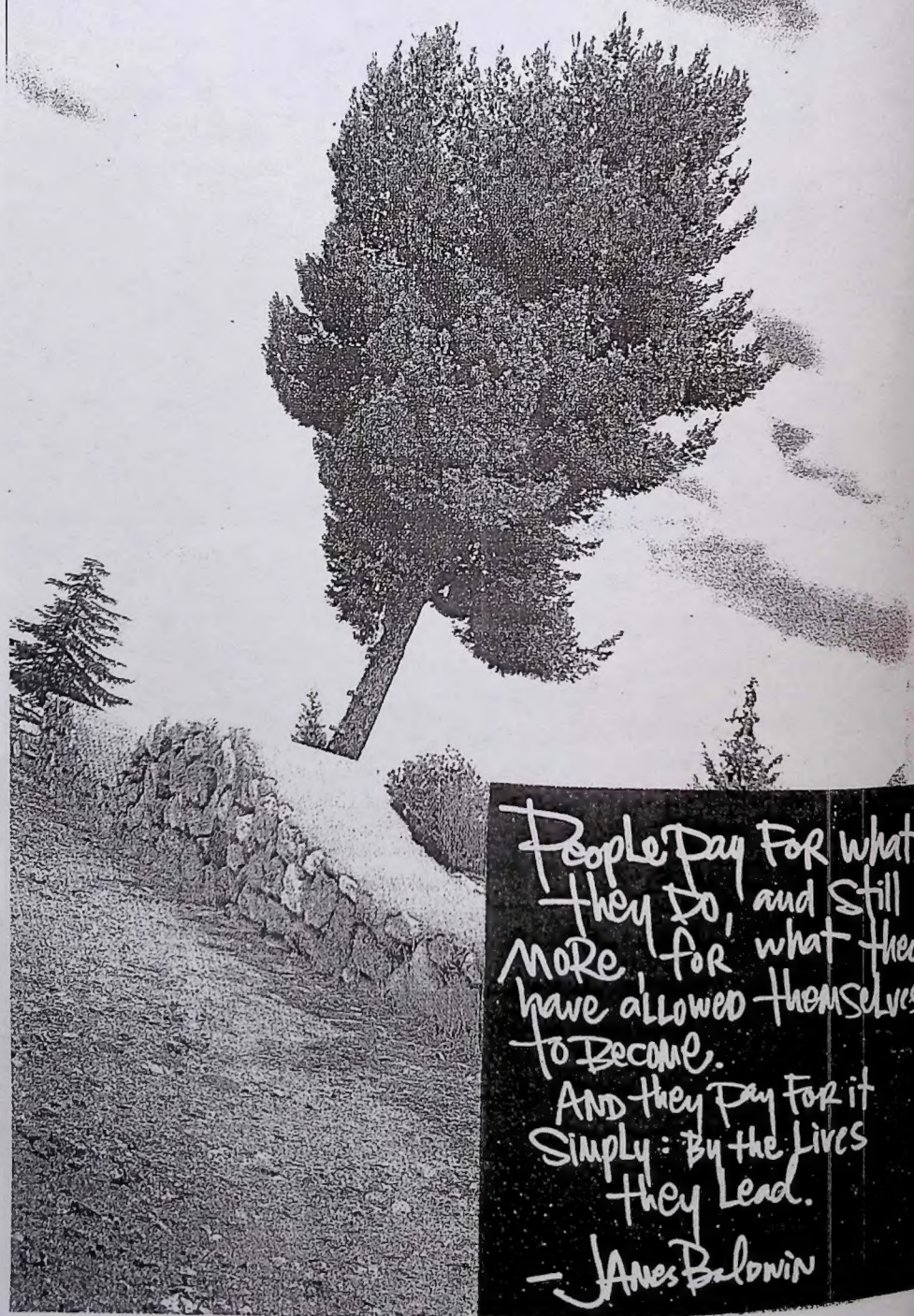
to pull any shit with me, i'd grab the wheel & take us both off the road. i don't give a fuck!"

that usually gets a change of subject in all but supplication.

if people are racist, which they often are,

tell them they are racist. use with discretion.

be flexible! be patient! enjoy this incredible opportunity to get around while learning about folks' lives directly from their own mouths.



People Pay For what
they do, and still
more for what they
have allowed themselves
to become.

And they pay for it
simply: By the fires
they lead.

- James Belton